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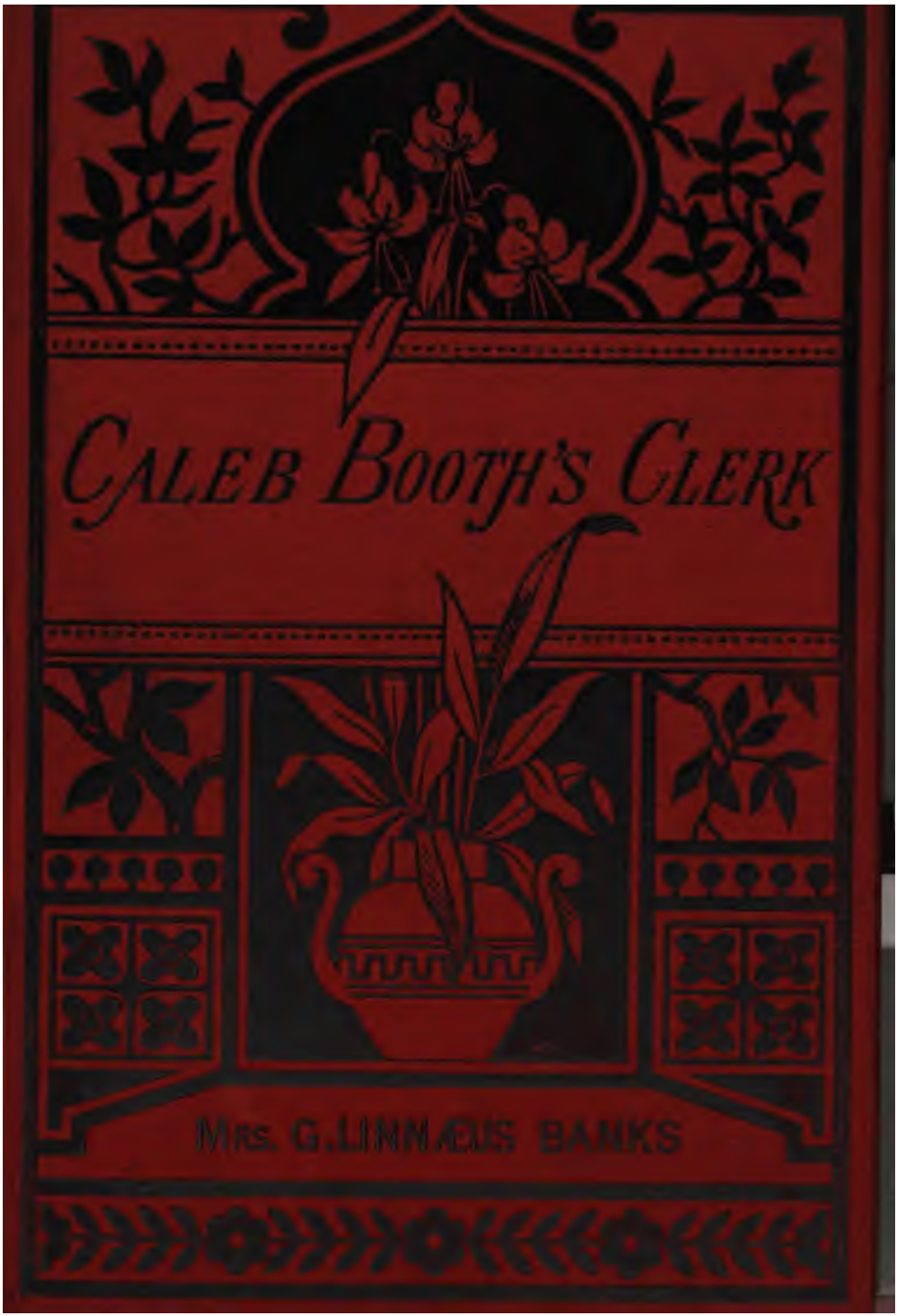
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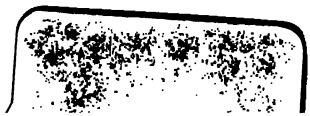

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CALEB BOOTH'S CLERK.

"MY DEARS, WE ARE MARRIED; THIS IS YOUR MOTH – –, MRS. BOOTH!"

CALEB BOOTH'S CLERK:

A Lancashire Story.

BY

MRS. G. LINNÆUS BANKS,

Author of "God's Providence House," "The Manchester Man," &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY

R. B. WALLACE AND G. C. BANKS.

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CALEB BOOTH'S CLERK.

CHAPTER I.

A FATAL ACCIDENT.

Miss Dent, the dressmaker, was introduced to the family of Caleb Booth, the bleacher, of Leigh, at a season when her quiet unobtrusive manner was her chief recommendation. Her voice was low, her footfall inaudible, the soft folds of her brown merino dress held not a rustle, her demeanour was calm—habitually calm, not subdued for the occasion—and she took her seat in the back parlour with the composure of one whose home is anywhere and everywhere.

The knocker was muffled—there was a hush in the room; even the canary by the window drooped its wings and moped because the blinds were drawn down. The tables were heaped with crape, paramatta, and more homely coburg, all of the same sable hue—sure indications that death had made work for the draper as well as for the dressmaker, the click of whose scissors or the drop of whose pins into a saucer alone broke the stillness.

There was no faint resinous odour in the house to indicate the presence of a coffin, nor did a newly-shrouded corpse fill any sheeted chamber with awe and mystery.

Yet on the floor over the head of the placid seamstress, Mrs. Booth, watched by tearful eyes, lay in a state of coma on the borderland of eternity, while a disfigured form, that of her brother, occupied a dingy waste-room in a distant factory, and awaited a coroner's inquest.

Mr. Hyde, the unfortunate man, had walked over to see Mr. Marsden, of Tyldesley, the previous morning, on a matter of

private business, and, not coming to an arrangement in the counting-house, had followed him into the carding-room. There, either the light office-coat he wore had drifted between the wheels, or in the heat of conversation he had laid his hand incautiously on a revolving cylinder or a flying band (it was not known which), but he had been dragged amongst the whirling machinery, and long before it could be thrown out of gear, *the man was not.*

In the consternation that ensued, some time elapsed before a messenger could be found sufficiently collected to carry the fearful tidings to the victim's relatives. On Frederick Marsden, the cotton-spinner's youngest son, however, the duty devolved, more on account of his intimacy with the Booths than of any special composure which fitted him for the office. Mr. Hyde had been his best friend, and his internal agony was not to be measured.

He had mastered his countenance before he reached the bleachworks of Booth and Hyde, and "An accident—a very serious accident," was all that he admitted to the dead man's brother-in-law, whom he had found in the private counting-house.

The vehicle which had brought Frederick took back the agitated Mr. Booth, and Dent his clerk, who seemed intuitively to divine the whole case, and insinuated, rather than suggested, that possibly he might be of some service to poor Mr. Hyde, and, if Mr. Booth did not object, might, at least, save him the trouble of driving.

With a thankful gesture of assent, Mr. Booth made way for his clerk on the driver's seat, and Frederick was left behind to break the intelligence to the family at home.

He found, to his dismay and distress, that he had been disastrously forestalled.

Crossing the bleach-croft to the garden gate, he met a woman running, with capstrings flying loose, and her apron to her eyes.

"Eh! Mester Fred'rick, aw'm fain to see yo! Missis is in a dead faint, an' aw'm off fur th' doctur. Happen yo'd be so koind as to go fur our mester, an' please to tell him gradely—bit by bit like—Mester Hyde's bin——"

"Surely no madman has brought the hideous news here already!" was the exclamation which interrupted Jane as much as did her own sobs.

"Yea, a great clunt of a lad, with a yead like a thistle-blow, an' a feace as whoite as his yead, brast in at th' soide door out o' breeath wi' runnin,' and without as mich as with yor leeave, or by yor leeave, shouted eawt—— But aw mun be off. Pleease goo in, sir. Miss Caryline'll beright fain to see yo. Hoos' i' sore trouble."

There was no chance of repairing the mischief done by this precipitate courier; and though he regretted the consequence of the boy's rashness and indiscretion, Frederick Marsden was scarcely, if the truth be told, sorry to be spared the pain of bearing pain to those dear to him; for Caroline was *very* dear to him, and was not Mrs. Booth her mother?

He found the latter lying on a sofa in the sitting-room, with Caroline kneeling by her side bathing her temples, and William, Caroline's lame brother, looking wistfully on from his low chair, whilst a young servant-lass chafed the hands which hung cold and helpless.

Fear had silenced sorrow. Tears chased each other down the cheeks of brother and sister; but from only Becka, the servant girl, came the gurgling sound of suppressed crying.

Caroline glanced upwards on his entrance, rose, and advanced to meet him with the low, hurried question—

"Oh, Fred, you can tell us! Surely this horrid news is not —cannot be—true?"

"Too true, Carry—too true! I would it were not!"

As he took her extended hands in his, he looked into her eager eyes sorrowfully, feeling that even as he spoke the faint ray of hope faded out, and her gentle head bent low in resignation that had its own pathos.

A lingering pressure of her hands ere he resigned them alone spoke his sympathy; and he passed on to the side of William, whilst she returned to her dutiful task.

"How did it—how did it all happen, Fred?" asked the boy in an undertone, with a quivering lip.

"I scarcely know. He lost his balance—got caught in the machinery somehow. I was not present, thank heaven!"

"Is my uncle Ralph much—much disfigured?"

Frederick would not distress the tender-hearted boy by saying *how* much. His uncle had been the poor little fellow's chief companion, his instructor, his playmate. No one, not even Mrs. Booth, would miss him so much as that boy.

William leaned his head on his hand, his elbow resting on the arm of his chair, and murmured reflectively,

"He will not be disfigured in heaven, and I know we shall meet there."

"The doctor!" announced by Becka, entered the room, to the relief of the three anxious watchers.

After inquiries, answers, remedies, with little result, Fred assisted to carry the patient to her chamber, and returned to comfort William in his loneliness—by uttering never a word.

The remains of Ralph Hyde, under medical and police supervision, had been placed on an unhinged door, and two men were drawing a decent cloth over the body, prior to its removal to the waste room, when Mr. Booth, leaning on the arm of Daniel Dent, his clerk, staggered rather than walked into their midst.

The latter, though a man of strong nerve, and mentally fortified by the expectation of such a result, turned pale; but Caleb, who had taken the expression "serious accident" in a more limited sense, stood transfixed with horror and agony.

"Ralph, Ralph!—my more than brother!" were the only words that escaped him; and there he stood rooted to the spot.

At a sign from the clerk, the men lifted the board, and removed their awful burden out of sight; but traces of the catastrophe remained, and Caleb lost consciousness as he gazed.

When he recovered, he was lying in the factory-yard, with his head on Daniel Dent's knee, and a glass of brandy and water at his lips.

Mr. Marsden, his eldest son Thomas, and three or four other gentlemen were grouped around; policemen and a body of the factory hands, male and female, crowded the yard.

"He's coming round. He will do now. The shock overpowered him," said one of the gentlemen.

"I wonder how Mrs. Booth will sustain the blow? I fear it will go very hard with her, poor woman," said another, addressing Mr. Marsden.

"Most likely, for it is an awful visitation—almost like a judgment upon him. But she will get over it in time—women always do," was the abrupt response of the big, red-faced, overbearing cotton-spinner.

"They can endure a great amount of continuous trial and wrong, as doubtless you are aware, Mr. Marsden," answered the former speaker, dryly; "but a sudden shock is quite another thing. Besides, there is much in constitution and temperament."

"And pious resignation, sir. She must arm herself with that. We have all our burdens to bear, and no affliction for the time seemeth pleasant," replied he, with slight acerbity, as though something in the other's speech had given him a twinge.

Breaking off the conversation abruptly, he turned and bent assiduously over Mr. Booth, while his interlocutor caught another bystander by the button, to discuss the word "*judgment.*"

CHAPTER II.

SUGGESTIVE.

THIRTY or forty years ago, country manufacturers were men of a different type from those of the present generation. Many of them were rough and unpolished as their own workpeople, and contrived to amass fortunes where education and refinement would scarcely have attained a competence. Railway intercommunication was too new to ramify into rural districts, though every year sent the iron civiliser farther afield, and sons, having had more intelligent opportunities than their fathers, scarcely seem of the same race. Even then all were not of the Marsden stamp—many were gentlemen, as now—now that the homely, uncultured class is extinct, or nearly so. But then, barring his individual peculiarities, he was only one of many. Mr. Booth, too, the self-cultured naturalist, had many of his kind in and about Lancashire, and he can scarcely be relegated to the category of fossils as yet.

Mr. Marsden's house and factory were built on opposite sides of both the road and the stream, which there had scarcely attained the dignity of a river. A respectable bridge and a scrap of road intervened between the two, the house overlooking the mill at an acute angle.

The former, an imposing square edifice of stone, stood alone on a slight eminence commanding an unbroken prospect on all sides. It was separated from the highway, the brook, and a large stretch of meadow upland behind, by a good garden, which surrounded it completely; and rumour did say that on its erection its owner exulted in the bosom of his happy family that he could "thrash them all round, and no one would hear them;" he had "taken care to have the walls and shutters thick enough."

Thither Caleb Booth was assisted by Daniel Dent and Mr. Marsden, at the instance of the former, whose respectful, unobtrusive sympathy was implied rather than expressed.

As they left the mill-yard, one of the workmen came forward, cap in hand, as spokesman for the rest, and said in a low tone to the overlooker—

"We hope as th' mester'll not go away an' forget us. We han had a fow job yonder, an' think we h'n earnt a mug o' yale ta wesh ar thrapples."

"Don't you see Mr. Booth's ill—too ill to think of——"

"*Ar mester's* noan ill—'cept he's cowt th' yaller jandice wi' keeapin' his brass too toight. He moight ha' fund a shillin' fur wunce. It consarns him a'moost as much as Mester Booth."

Daniel Dent must have divined the request of the man—he could not possibly have overheard the whisper at the distance; but after a word with his employer he turned back, and said, quietly—

"Let such men as have been engaged in this melancholy business go up to the Flaming Castle, and get what they want. I will follow almost immediately."

Again he proffered the support of his arm to Mr. Booth to help him up the hill; but no sooner was his principal seated in Mrs. Marsden's arm-chair, and in that good lady's charge, than he reminded Mr. Booth there were duties to perform which required his presence.

"Mr. Booth, if you will not consider me officious, I think I might spare you some unpleasant details, if you were to depute me your representative in prosecuting necessary inquiries into the cause and nature of this terrible accident, and in making such arrangements as an immediate inquest will call for."

Caleb Booth shivered at the word "inquest." Mr. Marsden fired up as if resenting all interference.

"Thank you, sir; but the accident happened on *my* premises, and if anything remains to be done more than my hands have already seen to, *they* must do it. I want no strange clerks prying about my mill."

The clerk gave a quick, sharp glance into his heavy red face and small suspicious eyes, which disconcerted him somewhat; but the cotton-spinner was not the man to care much for the looks of an inferior, and it passed.

"Nay, Marsden, I think you misunderstood Dent," apologised Caleb Booth. "My unfortunate faintness precluded even a common question on what concerns me so nearly; and I feel so agitated, I really am incapable of thought or action in the matter. It was very considerate of him. I feel it so. I do not think he would care for the secrets of cotton spinning, with a good master lying dead in the mill. Besides, he has some gratuities to dispense, and my poor brother's remains must be cared for on my behalf."

"That is another affair," interposed Marsden, as if correcting his own first thought.

"You will ascertain if anything is needed, Dent," continued Mr. Booth. "Here is money; don't spare it. Poor Ralph!

he never spared a shilling for me. Bring me all the information you can obtain; and, Dent, I rely upon you to leave nothing undone that we can do for——. Oh, Ralph, Ralph! I little thought this morning I looked upon you for the last time!" and his head sank into his trembling hands.

He raised it presently, saying, "Go, Dent;" and turning with a set face, inquired: "And now, Marsden, how did this calamity occur?"

"Pray, Mr. Booth, do not ask until you have had some refreshment," interrupted Mrs. Marsden, kindly. "We have all been too much distressed to think of dinner; but you positively must have something before Mr. Marsden tells you a word."

"I suppose I may please myself in my own house when to speak?" was the surly interruption.

"Doubtless; but Mr. Booth would be better able to bear the relation after a slight repast than, as now, faint and fasting. You can bring in the tray, Ann" (to the maid at the door); and the lady looked deprecatingly at her husband, whose surliness, though common enough at home, was not often exhibited so strongly before strangers.

"Mrs. Marsden, thank you, I cannot eat. Thoughts of poor Ralph have destroyed my appetite. I am too anxious for the particulars of his sad fate to swallow a morsel. What brought him amongst the machinery?" And he turned an inquiring look on Mr. Marsden.

"What brought him there? His own stupidity, to be sure. He was not satisfied with an answer I gave him in the counting-house, but he must follow me into the carding-room—meddling with what did not concern him—and I suppose he was so bent on convincing me that he didn't look where he was going; and that's how it happened. It was done before I could turn round. I had much to do to save myself, I was so startled."

The cotton-spinner had been walking about the room all the time he spoke. He stopped abruptly.

"I would ha' given five hundred pounds to ha' saved him! He was an honest, straightforward fellow, and I believe meant well, if——"

"Five hundred pounds! I would have given every shilling I possess to have saved him even a broken limb!" cried Caleb, emphatically. "There was no better man in the world than Ralph. How I shall break the loss to my wife I cannot tell. I am thankful your Frederick went round to prepare her."

Mr. Marsden had seated himself at the heavy mahogany table. He started up, shaking with passion.

"Our Frederick indeed!—the young vagabond. But for him and his vagaries it would never have happened at all. It's all his fault—his fault, I say" (looking directly towards his wife), "and I'll make him suffer for it;" and he clenched his fist as if to strike a blow.

"Fred the cause!" exclaimed Mr. Booth and Mrs. Marsden in a breath, the latter adding, "Surely, Mr. Marsden, you are mistaken. Fred was not in the mill; he has not been there all day. He was helping me to gather gooseberries when we heard the shrieks, and before he could reach the bridge——"

"Hold thi tongue, madam!" roared her irate lord. "I tell thi it *was* his fault. He is a self-willed reprobate, and you encourage him in his whims and his disobedience."

Mrs. Marsden sighed, but, knowing from experience the inutility of contradiction, held her peace, and proceeded to dispense the edibles in silence.

"Yes," continued the angry man, addressing Mr. Booth, "some fine tale or other, and a talk of his going to sea, brought your brother-in-law over here to expostulate with me, and teach me how to manage my own family, forsooth! Why could not he keep to his bleaching, and leave me in peace? I shall be haunted by him to the end of my days, and be hanged to it!"

Down went his knife and fork as he said this, and he strode out of the room, shutting the door with a bang.

Mrs. Marsden looked after him with a sigh of relief. Seeing that their guest appeared disturbed, she attempted an apology.

"I am sorry Mr. Marsden should be so unusually excited, but I fear the occurrence at the mill has so upset him he is scarcely conscious what he is saying. I can assure you, Mr. Booth, there is no fault to find with Frederick. He is a good son—but, indeed, you know that."

"I believe I do."

"Here he comes up the garden, along with your clerk. Surely nothing fresh has occurred!" cried she, hastening to open the wide hall-door herself.

"Mr. Booth," said Frederick Marsden, gravely, on his entrance, "I am sorry to hurry you away; but I am again the bearer of sad tidings. Mrs. Booth is seriously ill."

"My wife!—ill?" and he jumped to his feet.

"Yes. Some stupid blockhead had anticipated me. She heard of her brother's death without one moment's premonition, and has not spoken since. Caroline is anxious for your immediate return. Your own phaeton is at the gate—shall I or Mr. Dent drive you home?"

Caleb looked from one to the other vacantly, his mind in such a chaos he was scarcely conscious what was expected from him.

"I believe there is nothing more I can do here at present, sir, and perhaps it will be scarcely worth while to trouble young Mr. Marsden, especially as the drive home will afford me an opportunity to detail such sad particulars as I have been able to gather, and to render an account of my trust. You may have further orders for me, sir?"

"Yes, yes, so I may. Thank you, Fred, all the same, but Dent may be wanted at home."

"No doubt," assented Fred, as he stood on the steps. "I will be round in the morning."

"Can I be of any service?" put in Mrs. Marsden, with a half-hesitation which arose from no want of will, but from a doubt of freedom. "Caroline and the maids will require mourning, probably before Mrs. Booth is able to superintend matters for herself. If I can do anything I shall be only too glad to serve her at such a time, I am sure. I—I do not think Mr. Marsden could object."

"I don't know that, mother," struck in Fred. "He objects to pretty nearly everything you propose, unless it be something he can get the credit of. But we can see. I may bring mother with me in the morning, Mr. Booth. Don't let Caroline and William know how *very* bad things are here."

A hasty hope that they might find Mrs. Booth recovering—a grasp of the hands—an adjustment of reins and seat, and the horse was speeding homewards, bearing thither two men differing—oh, how widely!—yet bound together for future years by that very contrast—a bond on which that day's business had set a blood-red seal.

The dead man had been Caleb Booth's partner and manager for more than twenty years. From small beginnings he had extended their connection and advanced their interests, until the firm stood high in the opinion of country manufacturers.

Ralph Hyde was an experienced chemist, an unpretending man of science and invention, and while Caleb spent his leisure hours arranging shells and fossils, collecting nests and eggs, or stuffing bird-skins, he, in a small laboratory, studied how to apply and direct science into channels useful to themselves at the works, and to the world. He never contented himself with things as they were; he was always striving after something in advance. "That will do; it's good enough," he maintained, had marred many a promising career. "Onward and upward" was the watchword to the last.

He was likewise a man of strong integrity, was never known

to palter with the truth, or make a promise he could not reasonably fulfil; and if, in a business like theirs, where the grey goods of others were consigned to their hands to be returned white and finished on a given day—punctuality was imperative—it was still more important that nothing deleterious to these fabrics should be admitted into the vats on the plea either of "rapid action" or "cheapness."

So "Booth and Hyde" were known as fair dealers and scientific bleachers far beyond their own locality, and the works occupied a good plot down by the river—a position mainly owing to him whose work was over. If anything, Caleb had relied upon his partner too much; his own energies and activities had been cramped thereby, and in the first shock of his loss he was like a rudderless ship.

He was glad, therefore, when his new clerk so opportunely stepped in between himself and the painful business which had summoned them from the counting-house. And well had the clerk fulfilled his trust.

He had amply paid the men whose unpleasant duty it had been to remove and compose the body; he had conversed with, and quietly cross-questioned all who had witnessed the accident, or knew aught connected therewith. On his way to the Flaming Castle, he had joined the knot of gentlemen clustered round the gateway of Marsden's mill-yard, who were still occupied in discussing how an accident of this nature befalling so good a man could be considered as a "judgment."

As he drew near, one of the strangers was saying—

"Had it been Marsden himself, now, one might have felt it a judgment. I hear he was blind with passion, while poor Hyde was not even warm."

"Tom Marsden and the old chap say he lost his footing, and toppled over, but how that should be, with his steady head——" An incredulous shrug of the shoulders finished a sentence rendered more impressive by its very incompleteness.

"*Was* it altogether accident?" ruminated the clerk; "or does anyone know more than appears on the surface? I must look into this."

The confidential chat broke up on his appearance. "Non-committal" was the seal on each tongue, and he gleaned no more than surgical statements respecting the nature of Mr. Hyde's injuries.

At the Flaming Castle there was less restraint. "Owd Marsden" was in anything but good odour with his mill-hands, and they bandied his name and character about pretty freely.

Whatever he heard, Daniel Dent communicated no more to his employer than he thought was absolutely necessary for him to know—and which served to convince Caleb that he had at his elbow a faithful and indefatigable servant, whose zeal in behalf of the deceased was prompted by love and veneration—so gravely, yet tenderly withal, he described the condition and narrated the current account of the accident; so modestly he referred to what he had done; and so respectfully suggested odd matters of detail yet to be carried out.

Mr. Hyde's death had brought the clerk into notice, and Daniel Dent did not fail to improve the occasion.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE WILLOWS.

THERE was nothing cringing or fawning about Daniel Dent; he was simply respectfully attentive and unobtrusive, as became his position—a position he never appeared desirous to overleap by word or sign. It was generally understood in the works that he was the son of a merchant who, becoming bankrupt, broke his heart, and left his orphans to fight their way. How the story obtained currency no one knew; but it was tacitly understood, and never contradicted, although he himself carefully abstained from all reference to the past, or to his fall in life.

If he was ambitious, no one knew it; he pursued his daily routine apparently undisturbed by any visionary future. But something in his close-set grey eyes looked like *waiting*. He was certainly not the man to miss an opportunity.

When they alighted at "The Willows," he accepted Mr. Booth's invitation to enter, with an apologetic, "You may perhaps have further occasion for me, sir, else I should be reluctant to intrude at so inauspicious a season."

No one, in the confusion, had thought to close the blinds, and they found William sitting by the window in the early twilight, with his Bible open on his knees, but his eyes looking away from the book, on which rested his folded hands, with a searching intensity in the gaze, as though he followed the flight of a blessed spirit upwards to the gates of heaven. The whole aspect of the boy was inexpressibly touching—the pale, spiritual face, down which quiet tears were streaming; the fragile form, with a crutch to tell its story; and the book on which his hands rested, as though it were a rest for the soul likewise.

He turned his head as they entered. Mr. Booth sighed heavily—a sigh that was half a sob—as he pressed the boy's hand and bade Daniel Dent take a seat while he visited his wife.

William's twilight reverie was disturbed. He strove to ask the clerk some questions relative to his uncle, but broke down—he could not discuss the topic with a stranger—and that was Mr. Dent's first appearance under their roof.

The clerk, however, observing the difficulty himself, cleared it away by a skilful introduction on the subject, leading the suffering boy by gradual transition from the painful present to

the past time, when Uncle Ralph had been all in all to him; when he had carried him into the fields or to Atherton Park, and waded into the lake to gather lilies for which he craved; how, before his knee was so very bad, and he could walk without much assistance, they had gone nutting or fishing together, and Uncle Ralph had pulled the laden boughs within his reach, or helped him to draw his fish to bank.

"But all that is over now," said the boy, pathetically. "Some one else will have to take me to church on Sundays, I suppose. But who will care for me like Uncle Ralph? He did love me so!"

His head bent over his hands as a flood of recollection came over him, and his sobs were audible.

Just then a gentle hand was laid upon his shoulder, and stooping towards him, his sister Caroline strove to whisper comfort.

"Do we not all love you, Willie? I will take care of you always, and where I fail, Fred may be depended on. Oh, you will not lack friends! Father will miss uncle most. Mother's sorrow may be deepest, but father's loss will be the most severe. We must do our best to prevent them feeling it too acutely."

"They cannot miss him more than I shall, Carry. Who will teach me music and chemistry, and—and——" The rest was choked with sobs.

Caroline's sisterly ministrations continued, she all unconscious of a listener, until an observation of William's on his uncle's sufferings brought Mr. Dent from the shadow of the heavy moreen curtains and the deepening twilight, causing the girl to start at the unexpected presence of a stranger.

"Pardon me, Miss Booth, if I venture to observe that Mr. Hyde's death must have been instantaneous. The suffering is for his bereaved relatives."

"Are you assured of this, sir? If I could only think so, it would be a great relief."

"So the surgeons affirmed."

"I am thankful to hear it! But pray be seated, sir. Who shall I say is waiting for my father?"

"My name is Dent—Daniel Dent. I am the new clerk. I came with Mr. Booth," answered he, with a slight bow.

"Oh, I beg pardon; I was not aware. I so seldom enter the counting-house."

She stooped and spoke to her brother once more, in a low voice.

"William, mother will not be able to leave her room for some

days. Your knee must be dressed; and so, if you will walk into the kitchen, I will try what I can do. Here is your crutch."

"Then is mother no better?"

"Very little. She came to herself a while ago, but has since relapsed. Father is going to send for another doctor. Stay, William, until I light the lamp. We must not leave Mr. Dent in the dark."

The soft rays of the solar-lamp fell on the rich, golden-brown hair of a young girl in the first dawn of womanhood, and lit a face pale with subdued sorrow; large hazel eyes, in whose dreamy depths lay a wondrous wealth of feeling, with a power of self-control; an open forehead, and long, straight nose, and lips so expressive of the soul within that Daniel straightway forgot that he was only her father's clerk.

With the last wave of her muslin dress a light seemed to have gone out of the room. The lamp shed its circle of light on the crimson table-cloth, flickered on the polished surfaces of heavy furniture, which had done duty for half a generation; glimmered and repeated itself in the window, yet uncurtained; the tall bookcase, and the glass cases of many-plumaged birds with which the walls were crowded; but none of these mimic lamps shone with the tender light of Caroline Booth's eyes.

A glance sufficed to scan the contents of the room, and then Daniel Dent folded his arms and meditated.

He was not an ill-looking man by any means, although his peculiar dust-coloured hair was cut closer than beauty might dictate, and his thin lips were drawn in so closely, the inward red was all but invisible; his lower jaw was solid, his nose aquiline, and his forehead high but receding. He was not an ill-looking man, I repeat, although his eyes were too light a grey, and set a little too close; indeed, his sister thought him handsome. But then her own face was a reflex of his on a smaller scale, and the dust-coloured hair was barely a shade lighter.

Presently Daniel Dent's meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Booth, with a very troubled countenance.

"Oh, you are not gone. I am glad of that."

"Well, sir, at such a time there is no saying who may be of use, and any little service I could——"

"Then," interposed the elder man, "you would, perhaps, not mind running over to Manchester, and bringing back Dr. Harrison."

"I consider it only my duty, Mr. Booth."

"You know sufficient of Manchester to find your way to Piccadilly?"

"Yes."

"If the doctor will not come himself at this hour—and I am told he is singular and decided when he takes an objection—ask him to recommend another physician in whom *he* has confidence. Mr. Ashcroft, our own surgeon, wishes for a consultation, the shock to my poor wife's system has been so great. *He* advises Dr. Harrison. If you take a cab from the station you may be able to get back to-night. But do you think you can catch this train?" taking out his watch.

"Yes, sir, provided James drives me down to Lane End; and if he would remain at the Bridge Inn, to have the horse in the shafts when the last train is due, no time would be lost."

"You are a very thoughtful and obliging young man, Dent. I shall certainly not forget it."

[He does not intend that you shall, Mr. Booth—you may depend upon that!]

The gruff but good-hearted doctor was easily found, and required but little persuasion to move him; although he grumbled loudly over cooling his heels and wasting time at Kenyon Junction, whilst waiting a train to continue the journey.

The consultation left Mrs. Booth's case undecided as before. Dr. Harrison gave advice, but very little hope. If delirium did not set in she might rally. Recovery was possible, but not probable. There was no shirking the truth with Dr. Harrison.

Daniel Dent brought the letters to Mr. Booth in the morning, as he said, to spare his principal the trial of visiting the works at all that day, by taking instructions which might suffice for the time being. The foreman had represented that there was no absolute necessity for his presence; everything was going on very well. Jackson's jaconetes were ready for delivery, and so were Hayes's long-cloths. Nield and Son had sent in a thousand bundles of yarn for the bleach. There was also a parcel of goods from Isherwood's, but they did not press. Ellis, the drysalter's traveller, had called the previous afternoon for orders, but he had gone on to St. Helens and Liverpool, and would take Leigh again on his return.

The clerk stood by the table, hat in hand, delivering his messages; waiting whilst Caleb wiped his spectacles and read his letters, his eyes keeping watch on the door for the entrance of the young lady of whom he had had so transitory a glimpse the evening before.

The last letter was just opened when she came in, neatly attired in a pretty printed-calico morning dress, but pale and worn with anxiety and unwonted night-watching.

She was followed by Becka, bearing cakes and a coffee-pot; for, in spite of death or sickness, turmoil or watching, cooking and eating proceed with scarcely varying monotony—at least where there *is* anything to be cooked or eaten.

William limped in after Becka, and, as he passed to his seat at the late breakfast-table, held out his little thin hand in kindly recognition of a new acquaintance, saying,

"How are you this morning, sir?"

Caroline returned his deeply respectful bow with a slight enough salutation; but she whispered to her father—

"Mr. Dent is standing. Did you know?"

Accustomed to see his people standing at the works, Caleb had never observed whether the young man stood or sat. Thus admonished, he raised his head suddenly, with "Oh, ah!—to be sure. Sit down, Dent," and went on with his letter, which, for *business*, was somewhat of the longest.

The clerk's sallow cheek flushed as he obeyed—whether from pleasure at the daughter's courtesy, or annoyance at the father's want of it, or a painful sense of inferiority in position, it is not easy to determine. Something of each, perhaps.

"Will you take a cup of coffee with us, Mr. Dent?"

Mr. Dent would have declined, having breakfasted an hour or more, but Mr. Dent was glad of any pretext to linger; and even a cup of coffee taken together narrowed the distance between them. So his respectful "With pleasure" was something more than a compliment.

CHAPTER IV.

VISITORS.

CAROLINE BOOTH spent no superfluous moments over that breakfast-table. There was one on a sick-bed upstairs requiring all her time and attention (Jane was a good and faithful servant, but not much of a nurse), and sorrow was too recent and heavy on the hearts of all to open a way for conversation.

The very canary who had been wont to pipe a chorus to the rattling cups and spoons, now feebly chirped a reminder that his lump of sugar would be acceptable.

But his chirp was drowned in the sound of approaching wheels, which stopped at the gate.

Frederick Marsden had brought his mother, at what risk to themselves was scarcely suspected. The father had gone to the Tuesday's market in Manchester by omnibus, and would not return until nightfall; but there was no security that Thomas would not turn traitor, and, to curry favour with the money-bag, expose his mother and brother to the wrath of a despotic tyrant.

Two unpardonable crimes had been committed. Mrs. Marsden had quitted the precincts of their own house and garden for another purpose than service at Ebenezer Chapel, and they had called into requisition the cumbrous hooded-phaeton, which, like the horse, was growing stiff and heavy from disuse.

Mrs. Marsden, who had once been a fine woman, and still retained traces of former beauty, was dressed in what had originally been a rich black satin; a well-saved dress, so primitive in its simplicity that it became her well, was quaint, but not "old-fashioned," having never been "new-fashioned."

Her cap, set round the face with little loops of white satin ribbon, was, like her bonnet, plain almost to primness, yet well beseemed the smooth bands of grey hair, and the meek face they shaded.

A shawl of lavender china crape completed her attire, as imposing in its severe simplicity—taken in conjunction with the wearer—as the finest combination of brocade, lace, and flowers ever turned out of Jay's, or Swan and Edgar's.

Years of wanton torture, borne with the patience of a martyr, had not robbed her eye of its mild light, nor her bearing of its dignity.

They were ushered without ceremony into the breakfast-room; for Jane was with her mistress, and Becka was a young untutored girl, fresh to her duties; besides which, the Booths had almost risen from the ranks, and ceremony sat too heavily on their shoulders to be worn save on state occasions.

Mr. Dent rose on their entrance, replacing his cup and saucer as he did so. The action, simple and natural as it was, arrested the attention of Frederick Marsden, who found himself more than once in the next half-hour wondering "What on earth is that sober-faced clerk doing at their table? He's leapt into favour pretty quickly."

"Shall I retire, sir? You are engaged at present. Probably I had better go across to the works, and return for your instructions when you are at liberty."

"Well—a—perhaps you better had. Bring up some office paper. You can answer several of these letters here."

"I am so thankful you have come, my dear Mrs. Marsden; I am so very inexperienced, and am at a loss continually," exclaimed the young girl, as she put forth an eager hand. "You see, mother would never let me take any active part with her so long as my education was in progress; and I feel now as if my true education had to begin. But you will set me right, I know;" and the tears welled to Caroline's eyes.

"My dear, in nursing those we love, much more depends on keeping the feelings under proper control, and exercising a clear judgment, than on formal rules. Affection regulated by good sense will help a novice better than any teaching not derived from experience. But we will see your mother, and perhaps I may be able to throw out a useful hint or two. How is she now?"

The good lady had been smoothing down William's brown silken hair with her ungloved hand as she conversed. After hearing what had been Dr. Harrison's opinion and advice, she stooped down and whispered a few words of solace to the little fellow in that language with which he was so early conversant, and then followed Caroline softly to the bedside of her old friend, who lay with her eyes closed in a state of apparent oblivion.

On their departure, Frederick suddenly accosted Mr. Booth with—

"Have you any idea what was Mr. Hyde's errand to our mill Mr. Booth?"

"Not the slightest. Stay—now I recollect, your father said something of your being the cause of his death. What did he mean by that?"

"I can only conjecture, sir. I am afraid that kindly intervention between myself and father was the only motive which took him thither."

"Was there any special disagreement between Mr. Marsden and you?"

"Nothing special; but for a long time I have contemplated leaving England—going to sea, or to the diggings if I can do no better; and Mr. Hyde endeavoured to dissuade me, arguing that my presence was necessary for my mother's comfort. I think otherwise. As a boy, I was kicked about like a tinker's cur, and if I escape blows now, it is only because my arm has gained strength and my blood *can* rise to fever heat. I cannot whine, and drivel, and lie to curry favour like that sneaking Tom, and so I remain a mark for ill-humour and envy. The taunts and insults heaped on me wound my good mother, and they have latterly been base enough to turn on her in order to provoke me. What education I possess I owe entirely to my mother. Deprived of books, of pocket money, of society, of even the raiment befitting my station" (his clothes were certainly ill-made and far worn), "my progress has been checked on all sides. No entreaty of mine would move my father to give me a more liberal education, or to place me in any house of business where I might be taught commercial routine and the mysteries of book-keeping. Thanks to Mr. Hyde and your young curate, I have latterly been supplied with books for study, but I have had to secrete them, or they would have gone behind the fire."

"Dear, dear," from Mr. Booth. William sidled his thin little hand compassionately into that of Frederick, who had risen as he recounted the story of his wrongs, and stood by the boy's side at the breakfast-table, opposite to his interlocutor, the very model of fearless frankness.

"You know," he went on, "how I was dragged away from Haigh's workshop, when Tom found me learning carpentry, and was accused of low tastes and a desire to disgrace my family."

"Disgrace indeed!" ejaculated Caleb, who sat listening attentively.

"Well," continued the young man, in a tone of suppressed indignation, "Haigh was threatened with the withdrawal of my father's custom if he suffered me to handle a tool again, and from that time to this has had to undergo a system of persecution he dare not resent. Deductions, exactions, delayed payments —all because he had a good heart, and strove to help me to help myself."

Mr. Booth's hands suddenly gripped; but he only drew a long breath and said—

"Ah!"

"Mr. Hyde spoke to me some time since about my prospects; he said it was a shame for a young fellow of nineteen to be lounging about in idleness. He questioned me closely with a friendly interest I had never before experienced; and, having learned my inclination to become a civil engineer, and my determination to go to sea rather than remain in idleness here, he volunteered to introduce me to an office and find half the requisite fee. Then he undertook to persuade my father to furnish the remainder, and that was his errand to our mill. And so, Mr. Booth, I have indeed been the unlucky cause of your great affliction. It is a source of much torment to me that I seem to bring trouble on all who try to help me. I shall be off in the first ship after the funeral. I cannot remain here to be an eyesore to those I love, and my presence must in future be a very painful reminder of your loss."

"But it was not your fault, Frederick. You could not help it," urged William, who had listened eagerly, forgotten by the speakers, and had formed his own conclusion.

"Of course he could not, my boy. You have nothing to reproach yourself with, Fred."

"And Uncle Ralph was only doing his duty to his neighbour," added William, conclusively.

"By-the-bye, I have a letter here which——"

"Mester Dent!" announced Becka, thrusting in a tangled head; and in the clerk came to interrupt Mr. Booth's observation respecting the missive in his hand.

Mrs. Marsden and Caroline followed closely on his heels, and then ensued one of those melancholy discussions inseparable from death, but which serve in a great measure to distract the mourners from their grief—arrangements for mourning robes and the interment.

Custom will not permit us to bury our dead without ceremony. There is a natural desire of the dying to be buried quietly; but the living have as natural a desire to show (however mistaken the mode) "proper respect for the dead."

Mrs. Marsden proferred her services in the choice of drapery for Caroline and the maids, but knew nothing whatever of a dressmaker. Caroline was at a loss. Their own dressmaker had married and left the town, Miss Smith was full of work, and Miss Wilson had sprained her wrist. No one else went out to sew.

Mr. Dent came to hand in this perplexity.

"If I might be permitted to speak, I think I could find you a young person who might suit you—at least until another could be obtained. My sister, who has just left a fashionable establishment in Liverpool, is staying with me at present (What of the telegram from Manchester to Liverpool, Mr. Dent?), and could be with you as soon as the goods. She is very quiet, and though perhaps I, her brother, should not say it, has many qualities besides dressmaking which fit her for the house of sickness or mourning."

"We are much obliged to you for helping us out of our dilemma," said Caroline, gratefully. "Would you have the kindness to ascertain if she be willing to come immediately?"

Wherefore Frederick contracted his brows when others were so "much obliged," is a problem for the curious; or why he muttered to himself, "That fellow again!—and a sister, too!"

Two hours later Miss Dent sat by William's side, measuring lengths for a paramatta dress skirt, and *other* lengths not so perceptible or tangible.

CHAPTER V.

THE MARSDENS.

THE letter to which Mr. Booth had sought to call young Marsden's attention was a confidential communication from one of the Tyldesley gentlemen previously referred to, who had failed to see the special "judgment" in a good man's sudden death.

Professedly a letter of condolence, it contained an underlined opinion that Mr. Booth should have a legal friend present at the inquest (to take place on the following day, Wednesday), to watch the proceedings on behalf of the deceased's relatives.

Not by any means suspicious, Caleb was perplexed and mystified by the covert insinuation that there was something to "watch," and the implication to the "accident" was open to suspicion.

Once more he referred to Daniel Dent, and that individual, having no longer an excuse for reticence, admitted that some doubts had crossed his own mind respecting the late calamity, adding cautiously,

"Understand me, Mr. Booth, I have no tangible ground for either doubt or suspicion, and most likely to-morrow's investigation will clear away even the cobwebs of rumour."

"I should hope so. There was no one near Mr. Hyde when he fell but Marsden, and I am convinced he had no hand in thrusting him out of life. It would have been diabolical. No! Marsden is overreaching, but not bloodthirsty. I know the man better than that. He has ground down his workpeople until they hate him; and believe me, Dent, these rumours have their rise in ill-will."

"No doubt you are right, sir. I observed something of that feeling amongst the men I found at the Flaming Castle. May I ask if you propose to engage a solicitor?" added the clerk, deferentially.

"Oh, yes. I think it will be as well. You had better go round to Mr. Bradley's, and say he will oblige me by attending the inquest to-morrow professionally. Acquaint him with what you know of the case, but be careful not to bias his mind against anyone. Our regard for the dead should not make us unjust to the living."

"Very well, sir; I will attend to it at once. Have you any further commands?"

"As you pass Jackson's, you can call and bid him send his foreman to measure William and myself. I suppose we shall want fresh black as well as the girls," said he, with a deep sigh; then, as if repairing an oversight, he added, "You had better let him measure you for a suit at the same time."

Daniel Dent bowed his thanks, and retired, inwardly convinced that he was rising in his employer's favour.

"Nothing like making one's self useful," said he, mentally, as he went out. "Now, if Harriet only plays *her* cards well, we shall get on. I don't mean to be a clerk all my days."

It was evening when Mrs. Marsden and her son drove homewards. She had remained later than was prudent, considering with whom she had to deal when she got home. Observing that Caroline was worn and jaded (the effort to subdue her own grief, coupled with loss of rest and anxiety, having told upon the young girl, even in so short a time), the kind old lady insisted on taking her place by the invalid whilst she recruited her strength with much-needed repose.

Indeed, she hesitated whether to remain the night, and was only restrained by an unwillingness that Frederick should be exposed to the first burst of his father's anger, weighted, as it would be, by her unauthorised absence. So, much against her inclination, Mrs. Marsden went to her place under the hood of the lumbering phaeton, and, with a word or two of hopeful comfort, took her leave, promising to return. A promise not to be fulfilled easily, if at all.

Contrary to their expectations, the night went by without any unusual outbreak. Thomas eyed them curiously as they entered the house at the back—the hall door being kept chained except on very special occasions—and walked into the large square kitchen, where he sat crouching almost into the fire, although it was the first week in June. He, the only unprepossessing thing in the cheerful place; the stone floor, the long white dresser, dining-table, and other furniture of which were patterns of speckless cleanliness.

He looked at them askance, and a strange smile puckered his face, marking out the crow-feet already coming close to his furtive eyes—a smile which told his thoughts as plainly as so many words, and quite as pleasantly.

"I would not be in your shoes when my father comes home, if I or anyone else let the cat out of the bag. The cat *might* happen to scratch."

He was a man about nine-and-twenty or thirty; yet looked much older, possibly from the contraction of his chest and the

stoop in his shoulders. His clothes hung upon him loosely, except at the joints, as if he had shrunk within them, as perhaps he had.

As he sat there crouching towards the fire, the knobs of his elbows and knees, and the knobby knuckles of his bony hands, which he alternately warmed at the glow and rubbed together in silent satisfaction, suggested a shrivelled heart and a coldness of nature not to be warmed even by the fire before him. His nose was small and pinched, had a tip of red scarcely caught from the blaze; a slight grizzle of his hair, not from age; and his thin lips, commonly drawn down at the corners, now spread into that still more unpleasant smile, as he turned to look at them over his shoulders, offering a contrast to his younger brother, which it saddened the mother's heart to see. *She* remembered him a boy—and a baby.

Slight, yet well made, Frederick stood erect, too proud to cringe or quail; his dark brown hair brushed backwards left bare forehead and temples broad and high, eyebrows not too delicately arched, but strong and wide apart, as were the clear dark eyes they shaded. His nose was large and shapely, like his mother's; but there was a panting curve in his nostrils which had no counterpart in her meek face. Resolutely set were mouth and chin, though the lips were more tender than stern, and the eyes could as readily beam with affection as flash with indignation.

It was the latter tendency which had separated him from his father and brother, and to repress which had been the main object of their persecution. But the fire lay deeper than eye or nostril, and but for his mother, whom he almost worshipped, would have blazed forth years before. What he had endured, he had borne with Spartan heroism for her sake. The time had come when he felt that even "for her sake" he must be up and doing, instead of rusting in inaction.

And there he stood—his determination much more fully formed than his figure, which yet lacked muscle—regarding with infinite pity, bordering on contempt, the unbrotherly brother by the fire.

"Poor fellow! he is what my father has made him," was a thought which kept his indignation down many a time and oft, when it tingled at his finger ends, and closed them on the palms.

He put the whip he carried by in the accustomed corner.

"Has my father come home?" he inquired of Ann, who stood folding clothes from the wash at a table remote from the fire.

"Noa, sir," answered the woman, respectfully.

The figure at the fire echoed the words on the instant, with a quiet, taunting drawl, meant to sting and irritate.

"Noa, sir—noa, *sir!* Oh, you are a gentleman now, are you? A young gentleman who has a horse and phaeton at his disposal, and can drive about the country where he lists. No, sir, he has not come home as yet, or he might have made more work for the whip than it has had to day, though no doubt you have used it well, too."

"Look you, Tom," exclaimed Frederick, coming forward into the firelight with a stride, and that in his eye which made the other involuntarily cringe aside, "for my mother's sake I have borne your taunts and insults all these years, and never raised hand or foot against you. But that time is past. I have held you beneath my notice; but as we chastise a snarling cur that galls our heels, so I will raise that whip to you and lash you to subjection if you so much as breathe a scornful word in my hearing again. I mean it, and I'll do it."

The shrinking figure seemed to collapse under this resolute threat, as though he felt the whip already about his shoulders; but though he scowled and tried to raise a feeble titter, he uttered never a word. A coward at heart, he dared not brave that just resentment openly—he would bide his time.

No further notice did Fred bestow upon him; but addressing the servant once more, he inquired—

"Where are my sisters?" adding immediately, "Let me have a candle; I think I shall go to bed."

"Miss Emma's bin goan to bed this hauve hour, and Miss Sophy's playin' th' peannah i' th' dark."

Ann crossed the kitchen and the hall as she spoke, and while Fred vented his surprise by repeating "in the dark," prowled about the large wash-kitchen and felt in the empty candle-box before she came back to say—

"Aw've nobbut this bit o' candle left. Aw've gev th' last to missis jest a minnit sin. Yo'll hav' t' wait till your feyther comes whoam, Mester Fred. He's locked oop o' th' candles, an' sez he's feart we'll brun th' heawse deawn. But he's feart o' nowt o' th' soort. He's allus talkin' o' th' weast, an' weast, grudgin' every bit an' sup 'ut coomes in the heawse, an' neaw he mun tak' th' candles away becos he says as th' dayleet lasts lung after bed-toime neaw. It 'ud sarve him reet if th' heawse were brunt deawn over his yead. Aw've no patience with his moiserly ways an' his megrims."

The latter part of the sentence was muttered to herself, after

Fred had walked up the hall to the room whence a faint tinkle had issued to tell of Sophia's presence.

He found his sister, a blooming woman, with features strongly resembling his own, and marked by a latent spirit of humour, sitting by the open window, looking out, with her head on one hand, while the other wandered dreamily over the keys of the piano—an instrument which was old when she was a baby; and she was more than twenty now. It was a grand piano, and fitted into the corner opposite to the door, bringing the keys at right angles with the window-frame.

She was a lively girl, with a fund of animal spirits not easily repressed. Her brother Tom called her a hoyden; but she had long discovered that to keep him at bay she must appear untouched by his taunts or sarcasms, and often had assumed a waywardness and levity little in unison with her feelings in order to conceal them.

"Oh, Fred, dear, I am so glad you have returned!" exclaimed she, starting from her seat. "I was afraid you had had a spill on the road. The ogre in the kitchen has been revelling in the prospect of a scene between you and father to-night. I know he's brewing mischief; for there he sits rubbing his hands and coddling himself before the fire, just as if he were consulting a familiar imp behind the bars. I hope he does not mean to make a row between father and you and mother. If he does, I'll put nettles in his bed—as sure as he's alive I will!" and she nodded emphatically.

"He'll be turning round on you if you do."

"No, he won't. He dare not. Do you think he would let me plague him as I do if he could help it? I have just a leetle secret of his, tied like a string round his neck, and whenever Mr. Ogre shows his teeth to me, I give it just the tiniest little twitch, and the teeth disappear as if by enchantment."

"Suppose you lend your magic string to me, Sophy?"

"Can't. It would lose its power. But, Fred, to be serious"—and the light tone sobered on the instant—"how did you find our poor friends?"

Before Fred could reply, the large iron gate swung to with a crash, and a heavy step came crunching up the gravelled drive.

"There's father!" exclaimed she, under her breath. "I wonder what mood he is in?"

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND SON.

"You did right, father, to put a shawl round your neck. The dews are heavy, and the night air all the more searching for the heat of the day," was Tom's salutation as the former stalked into the kitchen—a big, burly man, whose red face and broad shoulders might well have bidden defiance to the blasts of December, and found the dews of June refreshing.

"Ay, Tom, lad, thah'rt the only one that thinks of thi father. All but thee think I'm made of cast-iron, and can stand aught. How dost thah feel to-night?"

"But poorly, father. You see, I was hardly strong enough to stand the shock I got at the mill on Monday; it shook my poor nerves sadly. I have done nought but didder* ever since."

Ann, a good-natured but dauntless red-cheeked woman, standing by the dresser in an indigo-blue cotton gown slightly sprigged with white, and shaking the creases out of a large garment she was folding, displaying a plump figure and bare arms in the process, was suddenly seized with a violent fit of coughing, and abruptly turned her face to the plate-shelf to conceal the grimaces she made.

"Ah, it was a terrible accident." And a heavy sigh found its way from behind the muffling shawl, which the wearer had begun to unwind.

"There'll be an accident here afore long, an' you dunnot turn out some cannles, mester. If aw go gropin' abeawt th' wesh-heawse i' th' dark an' break summat it'll cost moore nor a farthin' candle," interrupted the woman, resolutely.

"What has thah done with th' remains of last night's candles, thah extravagant jade?" asked her master, sharply.

"Brunt them ower mi wark, to be sure" (she did not say she had given them to her mistress and Fred); "aw wur na browght oop among cats, an' connot ketch moice i' th' dark."

"Surely the firelight might ha' served thee. I shall be ruined by the waste that goes on here. Nothing but waste and extravagance! It's downright robbery."

Whilst peevishly grumbling, he drew from his pocket a key,

* Shiver.

unlocked a closet in the hall, and counted out a few dips to the woman, who said—

"Are these all?"

"All! Yes; would thah have me give thi a pound to sweal * away at every turn? Ay, plenty, an' be careful of them. And now be off to bed. Tha'rt as bad as the rest—would stay up half the night burning fire and candle, and lie in bed all morning. Be off, and be up with the lark."

Thus admonished, though it was scarcely ten o'clock, the woman retired. There was a succession of sounds indicative of barring shutters, and then the house was still.

"I say, father, did you call at the Flaming Castle on your way home?" asked Thomas, hutching his chair aside to make room for his father by the fire, but never looking up.

"No; what should I call there for?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I thought, as you generally did, it might look singular if you omitted—to-night, too, of all times," returned the son, slowly.

Marsden turned upon him snappishly.

"Why should I go there to be worried about that confounded business of Hyde's? I have had quite enough of that all day. Not a man I met on 'Change but had something to ask or say about it. Had I stood in a Kirkdale witness-box, I could not have been more badgered with cross-questions. I was sick of the universal wail. If he had been a king instead of a country bleacher, there could not have been greater fuss made over him. Business men, too!"

He spoke with considerable irritation, tinged with contempt, alternately sitting down and rising to walk about the kitchen during his speech.

"Then the report has spread to Manchester?" drawled Tom, his furtive glance seeming to follow his father, though his face was turned towards the flickering flames, whose impish light seemed reflected in his eyes.

"What report?" sharply demanded the elder one, checking his walk.

"Why, of the *accident*." The emphasis on the word caused Mr. Marsden to turn and look steadily at Thomas, who, cracking his knuckles, never once took his gaze from the fire.

"To be sure," retorted he, after a pause. "Did you think I was the only chap there from Tyldesley who had yarn to sell, and a tongue to sell it with?"

No reply coming from the fireside, the walker resumed his

* Waste with flaring.

seat. Presently Mr. Thomas, as if following up his own cogitations, observed—

"I think if I had been you, I should have gone to the Flaming Castle *to-night*."

"What was the good of going there to have the same thing dinned in one's ears?"

"Oh, well, father, perhaps you know best," drawled out Thomas, with a chorus of cracks from his knuckles—"only *I* should have thought you might have liked to have been *prepared for the inquest to-morrow*."

"Prepared! What do you mean, you rascal?" demanded Mr. Marsden, angrily.

"Oh, father, do have some thought for my poor weak nerves! How you did startle me, to be sure!" and the man of thirty gasped like an affected miss in her teens. "I did not mean—any offence. I only—I have heard—It is said—there are very ugly things said about the *accident*."

"Ugly things said! Why, you were present; you saw the accident; you could swear it!" ejaculated the old man, as a sort of protest.

"Ye'es, I sa'aw it—I certainly saw it, and I could *swear* it. But what shall I swear, father?" and he looked up curiously, "That Hyde followed you closely, and touched you on the arm, and that you said, 'Hang thi, mind thah own business,' and then jerked him roughly off? Shall I swear that, father?" and a sinister meaning lurked in every sly, suggestive word.

"Hang it, no! Dost tha want to ruin me?"

"*That* was what I *saw* and heard, father. Scholes does say *he* saw you push Hyde; but then the machinery stood between Scholes and you, and might *confuse his sight, you know*."

"Hang it! What art thah driving at? Why, that would be manslaughter. Dost thah mean to insinuate——"

"Nay, father, I know better than that," interrupted the wily son. "I can swear what *I* saw; but then, you see, Scholes"—he made a halt, and, as if by sudden impulse, added, "You had better have looked in at the Flaming Castle; it looks queer your staying away to-night."

"Well, so it does. I never thought of that," ruminated Mr. Marsden, in much perplexity.

"You see, father, if you had gone up last night, and given Scholes and the rest half-a-crown apiece for the job they had done——"

"What should I give them half-crowns for? They did nothing for me."

"Well, there was that clerk of Booth's throwing half-sovereigns about like farthings—that is, if he did throw them away—*I* think he got something in return."

"You don't say so!"

"I do. But I say, father"—and in that quick, nonchalant transition how much of art lay hid!—"when am I to go to Southport? White's last physic has done me no good; I must try sea-bathing again. This accident has quite upset my nerves; I have been in a didder ever since. What with the shock, and my anxiety about the inquest, with the uncertainty of the turn it might take" (Mr. Marsden fidgeted uneasily between the arms of his chair), "I feel as weak as a kitten."

"Well, thah sees, Tom," argued his father, dolefully, "it costs so much every summer sending thee away; but to be sure health's before everything, and thah's the only one in the house that can feel for thi father, so I reckon tha must go. How much brass shall thah want?" he asked, with a sigh of assent.

"Fifty pounds."

"Fifty pounds! Why, lad, thah made thirty serve thi turn last year."

"Yes; but then—— Oh! father," he interrupted himself, as with a sudden remembrance, "I thought it might be as well if you had a lawyer present at the inquest, just to see fair play, you know. So I went up the town this afternoon and bespoke old Chorley. He's a good sharp fellow—wide awake, and no mistake. And I didn't stint the brass, so you'll have to pay me five pounds back, you remember. He refused to act without the money down;" and again the knuckles cracked significantly.

"Five pounds, Tom! Five pounds for nothing."

"Nothing, father! You should have stood behind the kitchen door at the Flaming Castle, as I did. Just wait till to-morrow, that's all. Good night. I'm going to bed."

So saying, the frail and delicate man, with the "shattered nerves," cracking his knuckles all the way, went slowly upstairs in the dark, to show how economical he could be.

But once in his own room, with the door locked behind him, he straightened his bent back, stepped lightly to a recessed cupboard, struck a silent match, and lit a private lamp, chuckling all the while.

Being so very frail and delicate, he was naturally afraid of draughts, was Mr. Thomas. It followed that a thick fell of list was nailed round the door, and, the chinks being well covered, not a glimmer of light was visible from the staircase. As he was

a confirmed invalid, his room was supplied with a well-cushioned easy chair ; his bed, too, was soft and plump, and lest the bare boards should give him a sudden chill at any time, the floor was pretty fairly carpeted.

These were distinctive features in that meagrely-appointed residence, the very walls of which had never been papered, but (save the one parlour, which was painted green) told on every inch of its bare plaster-of-paris surface the parsimony which checked further expenditure on the part of the inconsistent builder.

Little furniture had been added to that which had been bought for the newly-married couple out of the bride's portion two and thirty years before, and that was, of course, neither so modern nor so ample as befitted the mansion of a wealthy cotton-spinner. The house, therefore, was as incongruous as the owner—large and imposing without, but ill-appointed and incomplete within.

Hangings, carpets, and easy-chairs were luxuries too costly for any chamber in the great house not devoted to Mr. Marsden or his favourite son, especially favoured on account of his special ill-health ; and the indulgence was very convenient to Mr. Thomas, who frequently—as now—retired to rest early, and sat up far into the night—and the morning.

CHAPTER VII.

THE INQUEST.

Long after Tom had retired for the night did Mr. Marsden sit brooding over the kitchen fire, heedless that the blaze died out, the vivid glare faded to a sombre red on which a dull grey gradually encroached, or that the cinders and ashes fell on the white hearth-stone until they slowly heaped like a cairn over a dead man's grave.

He sat and thought, for Tom had aroused him to a sense of personal danger, and a new light was streaming in upon him. Hitherto he had regarded the late accident from a different standpoint. He had, in his selfish irritation, considered the deceased man more as an aggressor who had wilfully tempted death, and chosen his premises for suicide, than as one cut off in a career of goodness by the intemperate passion of another, and that one himself.

He had spoken and felt as if he were injured more than his son's friend. "What right had Hyde to meddle between me and mine?" had been all his cry. But that would not suffice now.

It had never occurred to him that strangers might interpret the case to his disadvantage—that the truth, bad as it was, might be distorted into worse, or that *malice prepense* could possibly be imputed to him.

Now, when the ugly possibility was laid before him, the big man, who was as cowardly as he was ignorant and overbearing, trembled like a leaf, and dreaded to confront the morrow.

The morrow came: the coroner and jury met in the club-room of the Flaming Castle; the body was viewed; the machine inspected, and witnesses were called up for examination—the two solicitors, Bradley and Chorley, appearing to watch the proceedings for their respective clients. The room was crowded. The deceased gentleman had many friends, and the interest they evinced was not of an ordinary kind.

The bare supposition that Frederick's father could have raised a hand against his brother-in-law proved upon Caleb; and that, added to his sorrow for the dead, and for the life of his excellent wife (still in a critical state), altogether rendered him pitiably [illegible]

A seat was found for him during the inquiry, Daniel Dent keeping close to his side, to be ready for any and every emergency—to make respectful suggestions, or convey odd messages to Mr. Bradley.

The preliminary inquiry was more formal than interesting, recapitulating as it did that which is already known to the reader, if not to the coroner and jury. It was only when witnesses were examined who were present at the death that the case assumed a peculiar aspect.

Mr. Marsden, whose usually composite character had now a tinge of fresh complication, gave his evidence with a mixture of trepidation, irritation, and dogged resolve to fight it out if there was anything to be fought.

And there was. He gave his version of the disaster decidedly enough. He had been followed from the counting-house to the carding-room by Mr. Hyde, who would insist upon his acceptance of a proposal which he had declined; that he was in *advance* of Mr. Hyde, and only knew what had occurred when it was too late.

Mr. Thomas Marsden, tremulous and shivering, whined out in faint invalid-like tones a confirmation of his father's statement. He was in the room when the two entered it, and walked up the alley between the machinery to meet them. He was about five feet from his father when he saw Mr. Hyde trip or stumble, and fall against the machine. His father was about half a yard ahead of Mr. Hyde at the time.

Mr. Bradley cross-questioned this witness with some dexterity, but Thomas told his lies and cracked his knuckles with equal composure. Lying was no trouble to him, he rather liked it.

John Scholes gave another aspect to the catastrophe.

"Aw wur bending o'er my wark," said he, "when mester cam' 'ith reawm, and Mester Hoide ahint him. Mester said summat that wur not jannock,* as they cam' in at th' dur, an' then t'other chap seemed to arguey wi' him; but aw could na tell what'n he said fur th' clack an' th' buzz o' th' machines. They cam' reet afore me, mester leadin' th' way, an' seemin' to wish t'other at Owd Scrat, an' then aw heard mester say in a rare passion, 'Hang thi', moind thi own bizness;' an' then he gi' un a thrutch reet agin th' machine. 'Twur a' ower then. Th' mester looked feart an' whoite as a clout, an' the machine were put out o' gear; but 'twar no manner o' good, the poor felly wur deead lung afore it stopped."

* Was not right. Jannock is the brown bread of the district, introduced by the Flemings centuries ago.

A very close fire of cross-questions elicited from John Scholes that he regarded his master as a tyrant and an oppressor—a proof of *animus*—that his work required attention, and that bending over it, with whirling wheels and bands, between himself and the gentlemen, he could not be *quite* certain that his master did *push* Mr. Hyde, though he "*did* see his mester's arm hauf raised, he wur sure."

Mr. Astley, a near neighbour, repeated Mr. Marsden's exclamation that it "was like a judgment" upon Hyde. That caused the recall of Mr. Marsden, and an inquiry into Mr. Hyde's business at the mill. Then Mr. Bradley forced the admission from the irritated witness that the dead man's errand had been to bespeak a father's care for a neglected son, and murmurs of disapprobation ran round the room.

Other witnesses were summoned, but their evidence was comparatively unimportant. Mr. Thomas, being recalled, swore positively that his father was, at least, half a yard in advance, and had his back towards Mr. Hyde when he fell—testimony rather confirmed than shaken by the deposition of Scholes and other workpeople that "mester seemed torning away," "had na torned gradely, but wur o' on one soide, loike Par'gate" (Parkgate).

The question of "sobriety" had been raised by Mr. Chorley, and though it was affirmed that the deceased had been habitually abstemious, no one could declare with certainty whether he had or had not taken a glass or two in the course of the morning, as was not unlikely, considering the heat of the day. The coroner himself endeavoured to ascertain whether the deceased had been at any time subject to fits, vertigo, or dimness of sight—inquiries met by a ready negative from Mr. Booth.

The coroner, in summing up the case, remarked that during the course of the inquiry a grave suspicion had arisen (involving the character of a gentleman present) that the death of the deceased was not wholly accidental, laying especial emphasis on the conflicting testimony of Thomas Marsden and John Scholes.

"The evidence of John Scholes, gentlemen of the jury," said he, "goes to prove that Mr. Marsden, in the heat of passion, pushed or thrust his companion, causing him to fall, or otherwise come in contact with the machinery. Mr. Thomas Marsden, on the contrary, affirms that a space intervened between the two, and that his father's back was towards the deceased when the latter lost his balance, or laid his hand inadvertently on the revolving cylinder. Mr. Marsden's declaration is to the same effect. It is for you to consider whether more reliance can be

placed on the statement of the son or that of the dissatisfied workman—on the eyesight of the one advancing erect to meet the parties also advancing, or of the other, bending over his work with a machine in full motion between himself and those he professed to observe.

"Mr. Hyde, you will remember, wore a light holland coat, which, presupposing a draught from an open door or window *might* have drifted towards the machine; but the day was sultry, and little wind stirring. He was likewise, you have heard, a sober man with a steady head. I beseech you, gentlemen, to weigh the evidence well. If you find that Mr. Marsden, in his anger, did push or strike the deceased, and thereby cause his death, then a verdict of manslaughter must lie against that gentleman. Should you consider that, either through inadvertence, sudden faintness, or giddiness, the deceased came by his death without the intervention of a second person, a verdict of accidental death must be returned. I trust I shall not have the more painful one to record."

The opinion of the jury was not given on the instant. They retired to deliberate; and in the long, tedious, and anxious interval, two different men displayed considerable agitation and uneasiness—Mr. Marsden and Caleb Booth: the former, for obvious reasons; the latter, from his unwillingness to believe the father of Frederick Marsden the direct instrument of his brother Ralph's terrible doom. Over and over again he questioned his attendant clerk what he thought would be the probable verdict, but that prudent individual was too wary to indulge in surmises which might impugn his own judgment.

Considerable time elapsed before the jury returned. Most of them were well acquainted with the principal persons concerned, both the dead and the living; and there was little likelihood of their taking a dispassionate view of the evidence. It was said by some that when Thomas Marsden squeezed his hands together until the knuckles cracked, he was telling lies or plotting mischief, and nobody could believe him.

One or two manufacturers were of that body, and they expressed their opinion that, if grumblers like Scholes were allowed to say what they pleased of their masters, no man's life or liberty would be secure.

There were others who maintained that John Scholes was a steady man, a little given to exaggeration perhaps, but not by any means revengeful; and one of these suggested that Scholes must have seen, or *thought* he saw, what he affirmed. On this the foreman built up a theory that truth lay in the "happy mean."

"I know, and so do you, Mr. Neal, that poor Hyde could not talk to a man five minutes without laying his hand on your arm. Now, we all know how testy old Marsden is betimes, and I think I see Hyde, as usual, holding his unwilling listener by the sleeve and the surly fellow shaking him off. Some motion of Marsden's arm Scholes must have seen."

There was a general concurrence in this view. No one felt Marsden to be blameless, yet no one wished to accuse a neighbour of so serious a crime as manslaughter.

The foreman, a grey-haired man of much experience, suggested a middle course, on the ground that an involuntary motion of Mr. Marsden's, not amounting to a deliberate push, or blow, had shaken Mr. Hyde from his equilibrium, and finally, after some warm discussion, this was conceded.

"Death from misadventure" was accordingly the verdict recorded—a verdict which appeared to surprise the coroner not less than the general auditory—Mr. Marsden and Daniel Dent amongst the rest.

Mr. Marsden's face had purpled during the summing up of the coroner, and not until the jury returned, making no mention whatsoever of "manslaughter," did it regain its natural tint. Then, however, he congratulated himself that he was at liberty to come and go, unimpeached by coroner or jury, and strove very hard to convince himself that he was unsuspected by his fellows, or unreproached by his own conscience. He strove to little purpose.

The impression left on men's minds by the verdict was that Mr. Marsden had had a narrow escape—"a close shave," as some of them phrased it—and he might think himself wonderfully lucky.

The congratulations he received were in themselves suspicious. They had not the clear hearty ring which would have followed the enunciation of "Accidental death," promptly given; something seemed to lurk behind the word "misadventure" which at once excited curiosity, and furnished matter for whispers innumerable.

Caleb Booth, the only sufferer from the "misadventure," was the first to extend a friendly hand to him—the only one to utter a sincerely cordial greeting.

He advanced, leaning heavily on Daniel Dent's arm, grasped the great red paw of the other, and said, in kindly though tremulous accents,

"I am thankful this painful business is over, and has ended satisfactorily. Our affliction at Ralph's untimely end would have

been deepened considerably had any suspicion of unfair dealing attached to you, or to anyone else. The manner of his death would have been still more dreadful to contemplate could we have thought that a friend's hand, however casually, had helped to hurry him to eternity." (Mr. Marsden shuffled uneasily, as Daniel Dent's sharp eyes took note.) "I am glad, both for your sake and mine, as well as for our families, that you are cleared from blame, Marsden."

"Blame, indeed!" exclaimed he, regaining his self-possession, and assuming an aggrieved tone. "Who was to blame but himself? If ar' Tom had not happened to be in the mill, a pretty mess I should ha' been in with his meddling in——"

"I think we had better not discuss *that* question now, nor here, Mr. Marsden," interrupted Caleb, with more dignity than his wont. "That web will not stand the sour;"* adding, with a change of manner, "The funeral takes place on Saturday, early. You will come and see the last of my poor brother; and so, I trust, will both your sons."

* Sour—a technical term for a liquid used in bleaching.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WILL.

CALEB BOOTH'S house and bleachworks lay contiguous to the Duke of Bridgewater's canal between Pennington and Westleigh. In striking contradistinction to the hard, square, staring stone mansion of the Marsdens,—perched on the bankside for the admiration of all beholders,—this was an unpretentious, roomy, irregular building, just old enough for comfort within and for the toning down of age on the brickwork; and it lay rather low. It had been but a small house when Booth and Hyde began business in a small way; and as the business grew, and the family, so did the house. A bay window out here, a dining-room there, a kitchen enlarged, a laboratory added, with upper chambers for casual guests, produced a dwelling more picturesque than severely architectural. Laburnums, lilacs, and weeping willows, when in leaf, shielded it on all sides and in front from observation. But the long, luxuriant garden at the back was the glory of the place.

There was a grotto devised and built in leisure hours by the brothers-in-law themselves, with vitreous cinders, shells, and glistening spars, and a fountain close at hand, not spouting up a thin jet of water like a dyspeptic pop-bottle, but falling in a miniature cascade over fern-covered rockwork, with a soft and lulling murmur, to wind its shining way out of the garden, a limpid rill.

It was a cool and sweet retreat in summer-time, for round it clustered all the odorous and bright flowers country gardens boasted ere ribbon-bordering jostled Nature out of her own domain; and paths wound in and out amongst greenery and rockwork, over which strawberries clambered temptingly. By such devices the garden acquired apparent extension, and kept the homelier vegetable department out of sight with embowered and winding avenues.

A small side gate, hidden amongst perfumed syringas, opened into the green bleachcroft on the kitchen side of the house, but from the deep bay window of the shady back parlour this was not visible.

Though it was not a house where covered-up furniture kept rooms in uncomfortable composure for state occasions, it was in

this back parlour the family chiefly lived; and here it was, with the homeliness of their old condition still clinging to them, Miss Dent was set to work, with paramatta, and coburg, and print about her sufficient to keep her scissors and thimble bright for a month at least.

She was working early and late, and therefore a bed-chamber was set apart for her accommodation, her willingness so to work being felt as an obliging concession.

For the benefit of the light, a table had been drawn for her use into the wide bay; and the blind partially raised; and this being William's accustomed place, they sat in close companionship, with the canary moping over their heads.

Miss Dent was not talkative—neither was he for a boy of twelve; but though she had a sort of "know my place" air, she had a happy knack of dealing with ingenuous youth, and as William made occasional attempts at sociability, however sad the theme, without lifting her eyes from her work, or dropping more than a respectfully-sympathetic word now and then, she collected a number of odd items of home and family intelligence, the value of which depended on the ears and heart into which they had fallen like seed.

Caroline came in and out occasionally, to have a pattern fitted, or with bulletins from the sick-room, which seemed to interest even the undemonstrative needlewoman.

Mrs. Booth had recovered consciousness, but lay so quiet, so passive, so unobservant to all appearance, that little could be said of amendment.

"Mother has fallen into a sound sleep, the first she has had since she was taken ill," reported Caroline, soon after the great tall mahogany-cased clock in the hall struck three on its vibrant bell on the afternoon of Wednesday. "If the sleep continues she will most probably awake refreshed. The house must be kept exceedingly quiet—I must stop that clatter in the kitchen;" and she turned towards the open door in order to check Jane's somewhat too vigorous application of the long-stone to the flagged floor which she had just mopped.

Her steps were arrested by a gesture of Miss Dent's. "Excuse me, Miss Booth, if I take a liberty; but might it not be as well to stop the clock before it strikes again? It is so very loud."

"Oh, *thank* you, Miss Dent, for the suggestion. You are very thoughtful—you really seem to calculate all chances," and Caroline looked the gratitude she felt.

Miss Dent bowed placidly. She did indeed calculate *all* chances.

Two hours later, by the marble timepiece on the mantel-shelf, Becka brought in the tea-things with a heavy precaution which made an impromptu concert on the tea-tray, and was told to keep back the urn until her master got home.

Just then there was a tramp of heavy feet on the gravelled path in the front garden, as of men who bore a burden. A modest rap on the muffled knocker, and the coffined remains of Ralph Hyde were brought in, to be deposited on the table in the dining-room he had himself planned, where his voice would be heard no more in scientific or social chat.

It was Daniel Dent who had knocked at the door so unassumingly, and who rivalled the undertaker in gravity, as with finger on lip, he marshalled the small procession forward, having undertaken the office alike as a mark of respectful attention and to spare his employer's feelings.

But no cautious finger-on-lip could subdue the noise of heavy boots upon the oiled cloth of the hall, repress the sobs of Caroline and the maids, or silence the crutches of William, as he came hurriedly into their midst. The mingled sounds floating up the wide staircase penetrated to the sick chamber, awakened the light sleeper, and fell on ears preternaturally quiet.

As the head of the coffin passed into the dining-room, Mr. Booth came into the hall by a glass door at the back.

At that instant, a wailing cry of intensest agony from the staircase startled the hearers, and there, in her loose white robes, with hair unbound, stood Mrs. Booth, wringing her hands—more like a ghost than a living woman.

There was an echoing chorus of cries from the hall.

"Mamma—oh, mamma!" broke from Caroline's pale lips, as she rushed from the dining-room to the staircase.

But before either Caroline or Mr. Booth could well reach her where she stood, tottering and swaying with debility, Miss Dent had left her work, and was by her side with a cloak from the hat-stand to cover her; and it was to Miss Dent's persuasion that she yielded and allowed herself to be carried back to bed, her own fictitious strength being exhausted.

Yet ere she reached her room the floodgates of her heart were loosed, and she wept copiously.

"That flood of tears will have saved Mrs. Booth's life," said Dr. Ashcroft, when he came in answer to a hasty summons. "Do not repress them."

Turning to Miss Dent, whom he found by the invalid's pillow, and mistook for some distant humble relation, he added—

"Now Mrs. Booth is out of danger, do you not think you

could prevail on this young lady" (meaning Caroline) "to take a little rest? She will be knocked up otherwise. I feel as though nursing was no new thing to you—I see it in your manner."

"I nursed my own sick mother for years before she died, sir. I have had some experience."

"So I thought. And now, Miss Caroline, I advise you to trust your patient in Miss——" He hesitated.

"Dent," she supplied, quietly.

"Miss Dent's hands, and go to bed."

"I could sit and sew here almost as well as downstairs, miss; and if I can be useful in any way, I am sure it would give me pleasure."

The obliging offer of the useful young person was not to be gainsaid. She selected her sewing, and tea was sent up on a tray for herself and Mrs. Booth; and thus, to the satisfaction of herself and brother, she was formally installed as a privileged attendant on the invalid—one, too, who conferred a favour in the service rendered.

An assistant had already been found to relieve the dressmaker of the "prentice hand" portion of her work—a girl who sat in the kitchen and took her meals with the maids.

Saturday came, bringing with it the undertaker, with his lugubrious band of satellites, and a knot of private friends.

The works, of course, were closed, and there outside the garden gate gathered and clustered an orderly body of working men, attired in their Sunday best; and if black coats did not predominate, there was a band of crape on every hat—a testimony to the worth of the dead master to whom the silent homage was rendered.

Mr. Marsden, his wife, and his son Thomas were among the funeral guests; but Frederick was conspicuous by his absence—the father, who had grumbled at the cost of mourning suits, having flatly refused to "lay a penny out in black for that thriftless vagabond." He demurred over his wife's coming, even though an earnest note from Caroline had begged the support and consolation of her presence, and only acquiesced when assured that her wardrobe, limited as it was, would furnish all the mourning garments friendship and her age required.

"I am sorry Frederick is not with you, Mrs. Marsden—Uncle Ralph was so fond of him;" said William, through his tears; "but Fred told us yesterday not to expect him."

"It was not Fred's fault, you may be sure, my dear. He could not come, in face of his father's prohibition."

Caleb Booth himself was almost too troubled and unnerved to note who were present or absent; but Dent, who seemed to have edged himself in as factotum, rejoiced thereat exceedingly. He regarded with an envious eye the intimacy of the handsome youth with the Booths—Caroline especially—and was sharp enough to know that seasons of grief draw such friends closer than occasions of mirth and festivity.

Had Daniel Dent been a relative or an old friend, he could not more effectively have screened Mr. Booth and Caroline from personal contact with painful details. He anticipated wants and provided for emergencies, and Mrs. Marsden—a clear-eyed observer—remarked to Caroline, as she saw him give some directions to one of the bleachers prior to his entering the last mourning coach, after which the workmen filed in long procession—

"That clerk of Mr. Booth's appears a remarkable man, very thoughtful and far-seeing for his years."

"He has been my dear father's right-hand man all through this painful week," responded Caroline, between her sobs, "and I am sure we have reason to be grateful to him. His sister, too, is a treasure in the house; she seems to know everything my mother wants by instinct."

"Yes, my dear, I think she is a good nurse; but for a stranger her self-abnegation is excessive, and though I feel it is wrong to sow suspicions in young minds, I must put you so far on your guard against too hasty liking, by reminding you that velvet skins may cover sinews of steel; and that cats are silent, smooth-coated, and soft-footed."

"Does your heart warm towards either of them?" the good lady asked, in conclusion, after a pause.

"No; and I have felt myself most ungrateful for that very reason," answered the ingenuous girl, looking up.

Mrs. Marsden smoothed her hand over the bands of golden-brown hair, as she said, impressively,

"My dear, our God has placed a sentinel in every heart. That sentinel may slumber at times; but once on the alert, let not the warning be despised."

William's crutch was heard, the conversation changed, and Caroline, more than ever pale and interesting in her closely-fitting mourning dress, bestirred herself with all the nervous diffidence of an inexperienced girl in preparations for the returning guests, for whom dinner was providing.

Ashes had been consigned to ashes, dust to dust. Ralph Hyde's bed in the cemetery was ready for its stone coverlet,

and the blinds were drawn up at The Willows. Back came the mourning coaches, with some few intimates.

The ample, well-furnished drawing-room was ready for their reception; and then Mr. Bradley, a spare, sententious man, produced Ralph Hyde's last will and testament.

"Perhaps I had better retire now, sir?" whispered Dent to Mr. Booth; "yet, if you should require me for anything——" and he hesitated.

"I am sure I cannot say," said Caleb, drawing one hand across his forehead, whilst the other played nervously with the seals pendant from his watch-fob. "Perhaps you had better take a seat and wait."

He took a seat, and waited, a little in the background, an apparently uninterested auditor; but not a syllable was lost upon him—not a face escaped his scrutiny.

Drawing-room, dining-room, and parlour contained each a low easy-chair for William. Mrs. Marsden and Caroline had placed themselves on either side of him, and he sat with one hand in his sister's clasp.

The will was brief. With the exception of two thousand pounds consols, funded for his niece Caroline, all he possessed—his share in the business, his property, real and personal, Ralph Hyde had devised solely for the use and benefit of his beloved nephew William; certain sums to be set apart for his maintenance and education until he was nineteen, until which time the whole would be vested in two trustees—David Bradley, solicitor, and the Rev. John Hay, curate of Leigh Parish Church. But should his nephew William decease before he attained the age of nineteen years, and die without issue, then the whole should revert to the testator's sister, Elizabeth, or, her life failing, to his sister's husband, Caleb Booth, with reversion to Caroline at last. But though the nephew could not dispose, by will or otherwise, of any portion of this estate until he was nineteen, neither were his trustees empowered to act in any way without the boy's signature.

Thomas Marsden's knuckles had cracked a commentary on each separate provision, an audible "H'm,—is *that* all?" escaping him as Caroline's legacy was named, whilst Dent's eyes visibly expanded. Even two thousand pounds was a tempting bait to a needy clerk, if no more were to be had. But the pupils of those grey eyes again contracted, and the close eyebrows drew closer, as possibilities of life, and death and reversions floated in a hazy mist before him.

That evening Miss Dent had a throbbing headache, which

needed the soothing influence of fresh air. She selected the quiet, if not picturesque, canal banks for her ramble; and if, by the way, she met her brother, who shall say it was not by accident?

CHAPTER IX.

CHAMBER SECRETS.

"WELL, what dost thah think thi fine friend has left that niece of his?" was the gruff question of Mr. Marsden to Frederick as he strode, whip in hand, through the garden, where, to fill up vacant time, the youth was hoeing out weeds.

Fred lifted up his head and rested on the hoe.

"Two thousand pounds, nobbut two thousand pounds!" continued the speaker, with a sufficiently depreciatory nod of his big grey head. "I'd have takken good care thah hadna gone dangling after her as thah's done, if I hadna fancied th' bachelor uncle had a fine nest-egg laid by for her."

"Two thousand pounds! Father! Why, *I* haven't two thousand pence, and see no likelihood of having it either, with no trade or profession in my hands."

"Trade or profession—bah! What dost thah want with trade and profession? Mak' thi own way as I did, and marry a lass with money," growled the elder.

"And treat her as you have treated my mother!" flashed across the young man's mind and rose to his lips, but he set his teeth and kept the rejoinder down. Then he proudly drew himself up, and, looking his interlocutor fairly in the face, said resolutely—

"Never! I marry no woman for what she has, but for what she is. And dearly as I love Caroline Booth, I would not accept her two thousand pounds unless I could lay down four thousand for it."

Mrs. Marsden had toiled up the steep path, Thomas lazily panting and lagging behind (a man from the mill had led horse and phaeton away), and her eyes beamed mild approval of her son's manly independence.

"Two thousand! If thah marries less than ten thousand thah'll never see a shilling o' my brass, thah may take thi oath of that. Go to chapel, lad, and look about thee there. There's Duckworth's daughters, and Kenyon's lass, godly girls, and rich to boot; and there's that Nellie Whitworth would snap at thee, worthless as thou art, an' she'll have twenty thousand if she's a penny."

"Ah, so fine a face and figure should go at a good market,"

croaked Tom, with a mischievous leer upon his face. "That fellow Dent's good enough for Caroline Booth and her paltry two thousand."

By this time they had reached the big kitchen, where they mostly lived. Indeed it was the most comfortable apartment in the house; and at that date it was not unprecedented for wealthy manufacturers of his stamp, not only in the country but some large towns, to make the best kitchen the common household room.

Fred's patience was exhausted. If he bore with his father from a sense of filial duty, endurance of his brother's taunts was no longer possible. He turned round upon him with a vehemence which electrified the cringing cur.

"Look ye, Tom, if you dare to say one word against that angelic girl, I'll shake the life out of your miserable skin. And mark you, once for all"—and he brought his hand down on the white kitchen table with a thud—"I'll marry Caroline Booth or I'll marry no one; and whether she have two thousand or ten thousand, I'll double it the day I marry her; you see if I don't."

A short, dry, mocking laugh, that puckered up his eyes and spread out his unpleasant line of lip, with a crackle of his knuckles, was all Tom's reply to this outburst.

The father, with Sophia's help, taking off his black coat as too good for daily wear, burst out into loud, coarse cachinnations, which made the very walls echo.

"I say, Marion," he bawled out from the foot of the stairs to Mrs. Marsden in her bedroom, when his mirth had in part subsided, "dost thah know this lad o' thine has found a gold mine? He's going to empty th' Bank of England into th' lap of Caroline Booth!" Then striding back into the kitchen, with a look of savagery in his face, he hissed rather than said: "If thah knows where to pick up gold by the bushel in that fashion, thah'd'st better pack off and find it. Thah'lt not lead the life of a gentleman here many months longer, I can tell thee!"

"Gentleman, indeed! If he'd ha' bin whelped i' Teawzer's kennel, they couldna ha' treated the lad waur," muttered Ann between her teeth, as she laid the cloth for supper, her indignation getting the better of her prudence.

"Not many *hours* longer," was Frederick's unspoken thought, but no word left his lips. He would not pain his dear mother by an answer which should provoke violence.

He sat down to his supper in silence, and Mr. Marsden standing up to pronounce a long grace over the cold lamb and salad, to which Thomas appended a sanctified "Amen," he sat down also and ate his supper with gusto, in charity with

all mankind—Frederick, as a minor, perhaps, might have been outside the pale.

However, the meal passed quietly, Sophia's sallies averted explosive topics, and Mr. Marsden only interrupted his munching to bid Ann look in his coat pockets for a box of Morrison's pills, which he took to cure ailments as yet unreal.

That night, long after the family had gone to their chambers, a low tap was heard at Thomas's door. He started, lowered his lamp, hastily thrust a bottle and glass into the cupboard, and listened. The rap was repeated.

"Who's there?" he asked, in a semi-drowsy whine, as the lamp followed the bottle and glass.

"A friend from *Southport*," came clearly through the keyhole.

His face set with an evil grin, and his sallow skin grew livid with fear or rage, or a combination of both; but he threw a dressing gown over his clothes for concealment, and opened the door.

The moon shining in through the open curtains revealed Sophia in a shawl and petticoat, hastily donned over her nightdress, which trailed below, and hid her stockingless feet.

"Oh, dear, how you did set my heart beating! I thought the house was on fire," whined he, lachrymosely.

"Here, Tom, stop that whine—it won't go down with me. There is no call for any waste of superfluous talent in private. I shall set your heart beating in reality. I want five pounds," said she, in a tone which indicated, "and I mean to have it."

"Five—five pounds," he gasped, in utter incomprehensibility. "*Five* pounds! Are you dreaming? What do you want with five pounds?"

"Never you mind *that*, Master Tom. I want it, and you've got to give it me, that's all."

"Is it? Then I've no five pounds to spare. What should a lass like you want with five pounds?"

"Eh! well, a lass like *you* might want fine clothes to wear on the sly, or a little drop of something comforting now and then, or a trip to *Southport*, or a cake of *Ormskirk* gingerbr——"

"For goodness' sake, Sophy, do be quiet. Suppose father should hear you?" and he tried to stop her mouth with his knobby hand, but she slipped adroitly aside.

"Well, and suppose he does, it would not trouble *me;* and if *you* keep me waiting here much longer with my bare feet for those five pounds, I'll take care he does hear. It's quite time he did!"

"Hush, hush, for heaven's sake, and you shall have the money, though what you want five pounds for puzzles me."

"What did you want fifty pounds for—eh?"

He had been fumbling in his pocket-book, and held a crisp note in his hand.

"I want gold," said she, just as he was echoing her words.

"Fifty pounds! Who told you I wanted fifty pounds?"

"Oh, only the little bird that whispers sly secrets to me—the fairy bird that knows a knave from an honest man. Thank you; they chink as if they were sterling metal, if you are not. Good night. I hope the five pounds will not haunt your dreams like a nightmare."

And with that his midnight visitant left him to shiver, and to curse her knowledge of his secrets, by turns; and then to take such a "nightcap" that he did not wake until the church-bells were ringing, and he was "too much exhausted with the melancholy excitement of the funeral to go to chapel."

There was likewise another absentee from the family pew. Frederick had not come down to breakfast. His room door was locked, and there was no answer to Ann's summons. He was equally deaf to the voice of Sophia.

"Hang it, I'll lay this stick about the shoulders of the lazy lout if he doesn't come down pretty smartly;" and Mr. Marsden grasped the ash walking-stick which for thirty years had gone round with him after the lights were extinguished, to keep him clear of machinery whilst looking with eyes and nose alert for possible latent fire.

He hammered at the door with the stick, and tried his stentorian lungs, and receiving no reply, would have burst open the door, had not Sophia asked (of course inadvertently) "How much would it cost for a new lock?"

The momentary question arrested his heavy shoulder within an inch of the door. He went down stairs, and all the more readily because Mrs. Marsden had joined them with a white and frightened face, and fearful that her one good son was ill or dead, begged that he would "force the lock and never mind the cost."

The pleasure of keeping her in suspense counterbalanced his wrath against Frederick; besides which it would lose nothing by nursing. He imagined his son was openly resisting his desire that he should find a wife amongst the rich chapel folk.

The sermon, on the instability of human life from the text "In the midst of life we are in death," pointed as it was with reference to the "late untoward event," did not exercise

a soothing influence or improve Mr. Marsden's frame of mind.

"Thah's not given that disobedient jackanapes any breakfast, hast thah?" he demanded of Ann, as he stalked into the kitchen.

"Aw've not clapped eyes on Mester Frederick sin he went oop stears last neet."

"Not seen him yet? Oh, Mr. Marsden do force the lock! There must be something the matter. Suppose he should be dead?"

Thomas, from his chair by the fire, gave a sort of wheezy cackle, half derisive, half-suggestive that his mother never inquired about him. Having breakfasted in bed he had dragged his poor feeble limbs down stairs in time "to pick a bit" at dinner.

"Matter! Yes," cried the father, "the young scapegrace is trying my patience. Egad, I'll try his! When his stomach cries 'cupboard,' he'll come down fast enough, and then——" Set teeth, contracted eyebrows, and a clenched hand finished the sentence as emphatically as words.

A savoury fillet of veal and a boiled ham were set upon the board, with potatoes and peas which Frederick had gathered and shelled the day before; but no soup, no fish—many courses meant expenditure; and as much as Marsden might pamper his own appetite when from home, he did not choose to tickle the palates of others at his cost.

"Call your brother!" said he, as the two sisters took their places at the table in the kitchen.

There was a redness as of tears in the mother's eyes as she glanced at Frederick's vacant place, and sat down in silence, whilst Thomas dragged himself languidly to his seat, and sat down with a sigh, as if the effort was too much for him.

"Grace, Thomas!" said the elder; and the obedient young man put up his hands and drawled out a formula which lost all its grace in falling from his hypocritical lips.

Mrs. Marsden made a show alike of appetite and conversation, though she appeared to sit on thorns, an anxious listener. Thomas talked to his father, but mostly of ailments peculiar to the worthy pair; Emma had a stolid imbecile look usual to her, but Sophia was scarcely her own self. There was mirth in her eye, mirth on her lip, and swift repartee; but a glance at her mother's anxious face was sure to give her a sobering twinge.

For a wonder, Mr. Marsden did not discuss the sermon over the dinner-table, and both Sophia and Mrs. Marsden felt it a relief.

The board was cleared. Ann had her dinner in the back kitchen, Mr. Marsden lit a long pipe, and kept a tankard of home-brewed ale by his side, and having exhausted both, threw a red and yellow Barcelona handkerchief over his head, and prepared for a snooze in his padded high-backed easy chair. But not one word said he of breaking open that bedroom door which shut in so much of pain and mystery for the mother.

The appearance of the handkerchief was the signal for the ladies to seek the parlour, where Sophia sat down to play a succession of hymns, and Emma amused herself with Hannah More's sacred dramas. "The Pilgrim's Progress" lay open before Mrs. Marsden; but her hands were clasped upon it, and her eyes looked far away.

After a time, Sophia left the piano, her arm stole round her dear mother's neck—"Don't fret, mother, I dare say it will all come right;" then the two wept together; but nothing more did Sophia say, whatever she might know.

Tea came, dusk came, dark came, and still no sign from the closed room; and then, indeed, something more than exhausted patience carried Mr. Marsden up the stairs followed by a train of women.

The door was thick and the lock was strong. It did not yield easily.

A crash, and it gave way with a suddenness which sent Mr. Marsden forward from his own impetus.

There was no one in the room—the bed had not been slept in!

CHAPTER X.

A GOOD FAIRY.

Sophia had visited more chambers than one the previous night. She had seen the swift flash of fixed determination on Fred's fearless face, and caught his muttered "Not many hours," and her first visit had been paid to *him*.

As she anticipated, she found him preparing, not for repose, but for departure.

Departure from a home sanctified by no memories save those of a mother's and a sister's love (Emma, passionless, stolid, immobile, was but a dull blank in the retrospect)—departure without money, without introductions, to tread the stony wilderness of the world in quest of the fortune so many fail to find, who set out with both; yet departure, less to seek a fortune than to exercise his energies, assert his independence, and vindicate his claim to manhood.

The project was not new to him. But his plan had been so vague that Mr. Hyde, to whom he had unbosomed himself, had persuaded him to abandon it—at least until he could induce his father to give him a helping hand. The tragic end of the intervention had precipitated, not delayed, the execution of his purpose. "If I fail it shall not be for lack of energy or perseverance," he said to himself. "Better perish trying to do *something* than decay whilst doing *nothing*." And so he was going.

Sophia found him, with his window-blind drawn up, rummaging his drawers, and collecting his scanty wardrobe in the light of the moon. She did not attempt to dissuade him. She was a girl of spirit, and her "Bravo, Fred!" was an encouraging stimulus to him.

"You've no money, I suppose?" said she.

"Not a shilling!"

"Um! that's not very encouraging! And I've only half-a-crown. I daresay Emma has some somewhere, but it's no use asking *her*. Stay—you wait a bit, and I'll find the needful; just see if I don't."

That she succeeded, and how, is already known.

She put the five pounds into Fred's hands, and they, unused to deal with large sums, or with the world, thought it an El Dorado. He had put on his best suit during her absence.

"Now how are you going to carry those things?" she asked, pointing to his clothes.

"Well, tie as many as I can in a handkerchief, and leave the remainder. I have no valise," added he, with a faint sigh.

"Um! That won't do. You'll want all you can scrape together, Master Fred, I know. Stop! There's an old carpet bag in the lumber closet; but if I upset something groping for it in the dark I would wake father, and then there would be a pretty kettle of fish. I have it. Be ready with all the best of your things when I come back. I'll not be long."

Back she went to the room of the shivering saint.

"I want your dark lantern, Tom."

"Dark lantern! What should I do with a dark lantern?" he whined.

"Ah!—what indeed?" was the brisk and suggestive response. "Come, sharpen! Don't keep me waiting, or I shall find your keys and get it for myself."

With a groan of the bitterest anguish he wrapped the quilt around him, and drawing the keys from beneath his pillow, soon put the lamp in the hands of his tormentress.

But that was not enough.

"Now light it," said she, peremptorily.

With another groan he complied, too much cowed even to ask what she wanted with a dark lantern.

"Don't fasten your door; I'll bring it back directly;" and she was off downstairs, fleet and light-footed. The stone pavement of the hall struck cold to her feet; but she thought nothing of that, nor of her scant raiment, nor of after-consequences to herself, so that she could help her favourite brother to escape from his persecutors.

With a dexterous hand she dislodged the old carpet bag, closed the closet carefully, went back, placed the lantern within Tom's door, which she likewise closed, and in a few minutes was cramming the bag with Fred's portables.

"Have you thought how to escape? We have no 'Open sesame' to loosen locks, and bolts, and heavy chains; and you are scarcely ethereal enough to whisk through a keyhole."

"I thought of knotting the sheets and dropping from the window."

"And leaving your ladder dangling in the wind, as a token to the first passer-by. No; I see I must be your good fairy to the last. Follow me. But first lock your door, and drop the key amongst the lettuces—it won't be found till Monday, at least. And be sure to write to mother at once, and send your letters

to Mr. Hay;"—Fred could not see her blushes in the moonlight —"he is a good fellow, and will bring them surely. If they came by post, the ogre would get hold of them."

He followed her to the back landing-window, which overlooked the upland meadow, and was close to Tom's door. The catch moved easily and noiselessly—there was not a creak in the sash as it slid upwards.

The porch over the back-door was little more than a yard below, and she reminded him that strong bars had been placed (by Mr. Tom's advice) from post to post across the trellis-work as supporters. Fred found them no bad substitute for a ladder.

A hasty embrace, a warm, true kiss at parting, a fervent "God bless you!" and he was out on the world; and she, the window closed, was back in her room and in her bed, all her forced spirit gone, sobbing as if her heart would break; whilst Emma, soundly sleeping, neither felt her quivering nor heard her stifled sobs.

So much time had flown during these preparations that had it not been Sunday morning the world would have been astir, and old Minshull round for the factory keys. As it was, Tyldesley was asleep, and from Hindford Brook to Great Elliot-street, whither he bent his steps, Fred met not a single person.

He could not depart without a word of farewell to Haigh, the honest handicraftsman who had taught him that hands and arms have a value as well as heads.

Haigh was asleep like the rest of the community; Fred's knock brought a nightcapped head to the upper window, and a half-dressed figure, whose face was blank with amazement, to the cottage door.

"I'm off, Haigh, at last. I can't stand it any longer," was Fred's initiatory salutation.

"Weel, aw thowt yo'd be stirring afore lung. Aw only wonder yo'n not gone lung sin. Where'ta ba'and?"* was the familiar but not impertinent response.

Fred's reply was brief—"To sea."

"Then yo'r fur Ler'pooil, aw reckon? Hast 'a ony brass, lad?"

"Yes."

"Yo'r sartain, neaw?" and Haigh looked up keenly at the youth as he spoke; adding deliberately, as if to force a truth on his hearer, "Becoas th' world's noan so warm out o' doors to chaps out o' luck; an' if yo nobbut say the word, aw've three peawnds oop steers heartily at yo'r sarvice."

* Where art thou *bound*.

He had been stirring up the fire ("raked" over-night with turf and a backing of slack), with a view to an early breakfast for the adventurer.

Fred wrung his humble friend's unoccupied hand earnestly; and I am not certain but there was something glittering in his eye that was not gold, as he assured Haigh that he had sufficient cash for his requirements.

The man, knowing the penuriousness of the elder Marsden, looked dubious, and scratched his head, unable to puzzle it out, seemingly unwilling to take Fred's *ipse dixit*.

If Frederick put back the proffered money, he could not decline as readily their homely hospitality, for Haigh's wife was by this time downstairs to second her husband's invitation with double heartiness. He was young, strong, and vigorous, and the raw air of the morning had sharpened natural appetite, so he sat down to his rasher of bacon and brown bread and his cup of cocoa with more satisfaction than ever he felt at any meal at home; albeit he ate and drank hastily, in order to be off before the neighbours were stirring, lest he should compromise his kind entertainers if a chance gossip should espy him and report his visit.

"Dun ye kneaw wheere to put up i' Ler'pooil?" asked Haigh, as they were shaking hands.

"I only know of the Crooked Billet. I never was there."

"Well, that's not very nigh th' docks, but it's o' th' better; less fear o' crimps an' land sharks. An' moind, lad, keep thi brass out o' sight if thah has ony; theer's a peawer o' sharpers preawlin' abeawt Ler'pooil as 'ud torn yo'r pockets inside eawt afore yo' could look reawnd."

"Oh, never fear!" said Fred, confidently.

"But aw dun fear! Young lads are ower rash. An' look ye, Mester Fred, aw'll just send yo' a line to th' Crooked Billet to let yo kneaw how the warld wags hereabeawts. Now, keep up yo'r heart—an' God speed yo'!"

He diverged from the high road and took the way down quiet lanes and through Atherton Park—a way open by kindly concession to the public. There was a noble and picturesque sheet of water in the park, spanned where it narrowed by a handsome ornamental stone bridge of three arches, guarded, as it were, by six couchant lions, one in the middle and at each end of the open balustrade. These stone lions had given their name to the bridge.

It was yet early when Fred Marsden reached the Lion's Bridge, much too early, as he thought, to intrude on the family at The Willows; and putting down his carpet bag, he leaned upon the

parapet and looked around him, as if to paint upon his mind a scene so soon to pass from his actual vision. He watched the white mist sweeping over the still lake, and upwards drawn by the warm golden sunshine, rise like a gauzy curtain from the green sward higher and higher till it hung amidst the topmost branches of the grand old trees, leaving a few shining tears amongst their foliage at parting, and he thought perchance so the misty veil over his life's morning might lift ere long. The air was tremulous with the song of birds, fresh odours wafted on the light breeze: the sweetness, loveliness, and Sabbath calm sank into his soul with their impalpable influence, and stilled the throbbing pulses in his breast.

It was here, in this park, that Carry and he had gathered buttercups and May flowers together as children. It was into this shining lake he had plunged to gather its white lilies for her, when he told her they were not so pure or delicate as herself. It was on this Lion's Bridge he first became conscious that her hand trembled on his arm, that her cheeks had a warmer glow, her eyes a more tender light for him than for all others.

And now he was going to leave the placid lake, and the placid love, for an unknown and tumultuous sea, for the activities of an untried life, away from home, from friendship, and from love.

His reverie was rudely broken by the oily voice of Daniel Dent, who came upon him unawares, from the side of the bridge near the quaint old hall.

"Good morning, Mr. Frederick. You are abroad early, sir. But I judge from your carpet bag that you are bound on a journey?"

Fred had an instinctive aversion to this over-polite man; of the two he would rather have met his own brother Tom. His answer was short enough.

"And *you* are abroad early—*very* early, since you do *not* seem to be going on a journey, Mr. Dent."

Then he turned again with his face to the water, as if to cut off further conversation, and leave his interrogator to pass on.

This was no part of Mr. Dent's intention. He frowned and bit his lip at the incivility of the other; but Fred's back being towards him, neither frown nor bitten lip was seen.

"My health compels me to rise early, winter and summer, sir. Sitting over a desk all day, in an atmosphere impregnated with chemicals, I am compelled to take an early morning walk to recruit my strength. You will not be under the same necessity, *your time being all your own.*"

Fred felt there was an intentional stab in these last words, though any difference in the inflection of the voice was scarcely definable. He bit *his* lips this time. Still he did not turn round.

And Mr. Dent did not move on.

There was no address on the carpet bag, and he saw that; and the carpet bag was old and shabby, and he saw that likewise.

He was accustomed to make deductions, and his brains were at work.

"A very melancholy event the death of Mr. Hyde for your friends at The Willows?" said he, after a pause, using, as before, the interrogative form.

"Very!" was the curt assent.

"I understand you have yourself lost a good friend in the unfortunate gentleman?"

Fred gave a half-turn at this.

"How on earth should the fellow know that!" flashed through his mind.

Fred had not been present at the inquest, and was unacquainted with Mr. Dent's faculty for obtaining information.

"Rather singular will, that of Mr. Hyde's?" insinuated Daniel Dent.

"I know very little about it," returned Fred, swinging fully round this time, and lifting his carpet bag, determined to move on himself if his tormentor would not.

But Daniel stuck like a barnacle, offered to relieve him of the weight of his bag, said he was going the same way; and when the other stiffly replied, "He was strong enough to carry it for himself," returned to the subject of the will.

"So remarkable he should leave so much to that sickly nephew, who could scarcely live to enjoy it, and so little to his excellent niece—scarcely a marriage portion!" and he looked askance at Fred, whose colour rose—and his temper.

"I think, sir, it scarcely beseems Mr. Booth's clerk to discuss his daughter's marriage portion, or his son's chance of life."

Mr. Dent for once had overshot his mark. He had thought to squeeze an overcharged sponge, and he found a stone, sharp and close as flint; and there was, moreover, in that down-trodden flint-stone more fire than he had calculated upon.

He apologised very deferentially; and then, as they left the park behind them, and trod the rough pavement of Market-street, Leigh, he turned off at a tangent to the illness of

Mrs. Booth, and his sister's attendance upon her, and his gratification that either he or his had been able to render service to their employer—beyond and above bargain and sale.

And in so doing, without saying one repeatable word to that effect, he contrived to make young Marsden uncomfortably sensible that he was growing in favour at The Willows.

But with all his cleverness he did not get out of Fred whither he was journeying with a carpet bag on a Sunday morning so early; though he stuck to him as far as the metal bridge over the canal, just to make sure that The Willows lay in his way.

He would fain have gone with him to the house itself; but with all his coolness, he could not venture to intrude there at eight o'clock in the morning of a non-business day, even under pretence of anxiety for Mrs. Booth's health.

CHAPTER XI.

FRIENDS AND FOES.

A BELOVED invalid in a house confuses clockwork, and makes light of precedent. As a rule, breakfast at The Willows was never on the table until nine o'clock on Sabbath mornings.

Frederick Marsden, walking round to the back door, bag in hand, with all the freedom of an old friend, to avoid disturbing the patient by a knock at the front, came suddenly upon Becka at the foot of the staircase, carrying a tray upstairs with breakfast for Mrs. Booth and Miss Dent, and so startled the girl that she almost dropped the tray. As it was she stumbled, and made a clatter with the china that brought Caroline to the parlour door.

Her surprise exceeded that of the servant maid. He was putting his bag out of the way, and his back was towards her.

Involuntarily she closed the parlour door.

"Why, Fred, what brings you here at——?"

Becka and tray had turned the corner of the staircase, when Fred, catching Caroline in his arms, stopped her question with a succession of kisses, much more impassioned than his customary morning salute.

He saw her for the first time in her black dress, and the swift thought of the recent awful parting of which it was a memento, and the sudden parting that was coming, with all its loads of possibilities, found expression in those quick kisses and that straining clasp.

"I have left home, Carry, love," were his first words when his lips were free.

"Left home, Fred!" was Caroline's exclamation, aghast.

"Yes, my darling; I am going away alto——"

"What is all this whispering about in the hall?" asked Mr. Booth, putting his head out of the parlour door. "Eh, Fred; is that you, lad? Come in, lad, and don't stand chattering there. Come, Carry, lass; the breakfast's going cold."

Into the room they went together; and there, to their surprise, pain, and indignation, Fred Marsden repeated much the same tale he had told Haigh, and Mr. Booth put to him pretty much the same question respecting his finances as had been put by the honest artisan.

Both men had arrived at the same conclusion, both were equally surprised at his answer, and both disposed to help him according to their means.

Poor Caroline! It had been a terrible week for her. Her uncle killed and buried, her mother only just emerging from the shadow of death, and now her lover going away—going with so little prospect before him, so little certainty whither or for what, that to her it seemed like a final separation. Talk of the knell of Hope! With the announcement of Fred's departure, a restless sea seemed surging within her, and then through the surge she heard a ghostly bell tolling—tolling long enough before the actual church bells summoned the people of Leigh to their prayers.

How she blundered through that breakfast ceremonial she could never tell. They lingered long, but there was little eaten. The canary's call for his share of the feast was unheeded, and I fear neither egg nor sugar found its way to its cage that morning. Indeed, he had already begun to have the melancholy aspect of a bird neglected by others and by himself.

Frederick sat between William and Caroline, the girl's left hand in his own beneath the shelter of the friendly table-cloth.

William, who had his uncle's habit of touching those with whom he conversed, hung, as it were, with his hand affectionately on Fred's other shoulder. To him the young man had been as an elder brother—better than many brothers—and the thought of parting from him was most painful. But resignation was the one great feature of the lame boy's character, and he bent himself, like one of the willows in their own garden, to meet the inevitable.

"You know Uncle Ralph has left me nearly all his money, Fred," he whispered in his ear; "so don't be afraid, and be sure to come back by the time I'm nineteen; for then, if you've no money of your own, you can go shares with me. But, oh, what a while that is to wait!" with a sigh, and the unuttered thought, "I may be dead before then."

The warm grip Fred gave the boy's slender hand told how gratefully he appreciated the generous offer, though he answered never a word.

Mr. Booth, notwithstanding his want of self-reliance, was not destitute of business method and forethought, and knowing how matters stood between Fred and his daughter, he made no scruple of bringing the young man's airy castle to *terra firma*.

All England—nay, all Europe—was then panting in the frenzy of the gold fever. All ranks sent their quota to the

newly-discovered gold-fields; rough churls who could elbow their way through the crowd, or force it through the bush, and silken sons of dainty mothers, for whom pen or billiard-cue was fitter than pick and spade. Frederick Marsden's notion was like that of many another—to pick up golden nuggets in Australia like pebbles, and in two or three years to come back with a splendid fortune, marry Caroline, endow Sophia, and make his mother happy.

Mr. Booth was not so sanguine. He knew the uphill work of fortune-making even in his native land, with a definite idea to work upon, and skill to carry it out. Still he did not daunt the young man's ardour by "pshaws!" and "pishes!" but he was practical.

"And so you mean to work your passage to Australia?" debated he. "Caroline, some more sugar. Well, there will be no harm in that if you can find a berth; but supposing yourself landed at Melbourne, how do you propose to get on to Bendigo or Ballarat, and supply yourself even with mining tools?"

"Oh, I shall get on somehow," was the vague answer. "I have health and strength, and am not without money."

"Somehow's nohow, my lad. I should like to hear something more tangible than that. I know you can dig, and are not afraid of work" (the hours he had given to their garden, for the mere sake of exercise, had told that); "but if you don't mean Carry to die of grief, or to wait for you till she's a crusty old maid, you must start with a better notion of what's before you, and have some capital to start with. Now, out with it. How much have you?"

Fred stammered, hesitated, and just as he blundered out, "Five pounds," there was a gentle tap at the door. Miss Dent's dust-coloured hair and dull grey eyes, at the top of a closely-fitting, soft, black merino dress, appeared on the threshold.

"Mrs. Booth has asked for you, miss, and for young Mr. Marsden."

"Go and see what your mother wants, Carry. I will follow presently with Fred."

Caroline obeyed, and then Mr. Booth proffered Fred capital to start with; but no, the youth was obstinate, and the utmost he would accept was ten pounds as a loan.

"Well, my boy, your spirit does you credit. I fought my way up; but that was in our own land. It wants money as well as resolution to make way in a foreign country. But you will not refuse a letter of introduction to a friend I have in Liverpool, a shipowner, who may perhaps find you a berth."

"Certainly *not!* It is the very opening I most desire!" and the young man's thanks illuminated his open countenance.

Then they went upstairs. Becka had duly reported Fred's arrival "*with a large* carpet bag" in a mysterious whisper to the placid young lady in attendance on Mrs. Booth; and having picked up stray words during her own attendance in the breakfast parlour, had relieved her surcharged mind a second time.

Sensitively acute, Mrs. Booth's ears caught from the audible whisper the words "Fred Marsden" and "Australia," and at once she became restless to see him.

Sickness was new to Fred, and he was little prepared for the change a week had made in the plump, rosy-cheeked matron he had known. Her eyes were hollow, her cheeks—on which faint red lines still meandered like intersecting boundaries on maps—were sunken and pale.

She put out a thin white hand to meet his, and in a voice scarcely audible answered the look in his eyes.

"Ah, Fred, you think I am changed now, but I shall be more changed before you come back, if you are going so far away."

"I hope to find you strong and well then, Mrs. Booth; able to dance at my wedding."

Miss Dent's ears were on the alert.

"I am stronger than I was, Fred, and Dr. Ashcroft says I am mending a cake at a meal; but for all that, *you* will never see me alive again. I *know* it."

Caroline was in tears.

"Hush, my dear; you must not get those notions into your head," remonstrated Caleb, gently, pressing the other thin palm that lay so white on the counterpane.

"Come hither, Caroline."

The saddened girl, at her mother's bidding, took her father's place by the side of Fred, and, obedient to a gesture, put her hand also in her mother's.

"I shall not live to see your wedding"—and here she feebly joined their hands—"but I give you to each other now, while you can hear me bless you. Fred, she has been a good daughter, and will make you as good a wife. I believe you have been a good son and a good brother, and I can trust her in your keeping. She will wait for you and marry you—when you come—back—whether rich or poor. But you must have faith in each other, and above all—faith in God. My prayers will go with you. Bless you both."

She had spoken in gasps, and sank back exhausted. Miss

Dent moistened her lips with a little wine and water, and when she revived, Fred, with his arm round Caroline's waist, led the latter from the room.

They found their way to the seclusion of the grotto, and there, with her head on his shoulder, Caroline gave way to the tears she had kept back with so much effort. Fred did his best to soothe and comfort her, professing himself more hopeful and sanguine than he absolutely was.

"It is very, very hard to lose both uncle and you in one week," she sobbed, "and to hear mother talk of dying as she does. I feel as if my heart was breaking."

"Hush, Caroline, darling. I shall come back again, never fear. We are both too young to marry now, even if I remained at home and had means. We shall only be waiting for each other at a distance, that is all. There is no fear of our changing, I think."

"Changing! Oh, Fred, have we not loved each other ever since I was a baby? *I* shall never change—never!"

Frederick's answer had no translatable language, but he made his thanks understood. Nevertheless, the echoes of the church bells had died away an hour before the pair left the grotto, and then there were last farewells to be said indoors, and many a kiss and many a last embrace before the final wrench, when Caroline carried her sorrow to the solitude of her own room.

Fred was growing anxious lest, his absence being discovered, he should be traced to The Willows and be carried back *vi et armis*.

Caleb had had a horse put into the phaeton, and he himself undertook to drive his young friend to Bury Lane End to meet the first train.

As William had petitioned to bear them company, he was lifted to his seat at the back, while Jane and Becka, strongly enjoined to "know nothing" if inquiries were made, stood on the steps looking after them, with uplifted aprons and very red eyes, crying in concert—an additional testimony, if any were wanted, to the good qualities of the intended traveller; but sadly detrimental to preparations for dinner.

Miss Dent, too, was on the look-out, not openly, like the others, but covertly between the laths of the Venetian blinds, with a smile on her thin lips which boded no good to somebody.

Not far from the house they encountered Daniel Dent, prayer-book in hand, as if just returned from church.

He left the footpath as if desirous to speak, and Caleb checked

the horse, but he only remarked that he would take the liberty to call at The Willows, to inquire after Mrs. Booth, and exchange a word with his sister. Yet, as they drove on, he looked after them with that sister's ill-omened smile intensified on his face.

"I don't like that man!" exclaimed Frederick, bluntly, when they had passed.

"Not like him!" echoed Caleb, in blank amazement. "Why, he is the very model of a rising man," flicking the horse with his whip as he spoke. "He is so thoughtful, so attentive, so obliging; he is sure to get on."

"Yes, and to pull others down to mount upon. He is not the man I should care to make an enemy of" (yet he had done something towards it that morning in Atherton Park). "No, nor a friend either, Mr. Booth," added Fred, with emphasis.

"Why, Fred, your eyes are jaundiced this morning. You are not generally a backbiter. What can my clerk have done to court *your* ill word?" smilingly questioned the elder, whilst William, sitting behind, caught every syllable.

"I pretty generally speak my mind, and now I have thrown off tyrannical shackles, I feel tempted to use my freedom of thought and speech; and I repeat, I do *not* like that man, and I am sorry to see that you do. He's a sneak—I feel that he is," and, looking over his shoulder, Fred nodded to William, who looked up with bright assenting eyes.

"What reasons have you for such suspicion, Frederick?" said Mr. Booth, gravely. "It is a sweeping charge."

"I have no *reason*, Mr. Booth, only instinct; and I feel as if that Dent and his sister were a couple of sleek-skinned, soft-footed cats. I only hope they will not use their claws to the dear ones I leave behind;" and Fred's own impressions strengthening as he spoke, he added to the listener behind, "and if you see either of those cats prowling about Caroline, remember what I have said."

"I shall not forget," said William, who never forgot anything.

Mr. Booth, having an impression that Frederick was jaundiced through his own ill-luck, and not caring to have his son's mind biased, turned the conversation.

A train was almost due when they drove under the railway bridge at Bury Lane Station. Mr. Booth handed Fred an introductory letter to his friend Mr. Lyons, gave him a few words of general instruction, and pressed a bank-note into his hand as the train steamed in.

Fred had barely time to whisper, "I leave Caroline in your

charge, William ; if anything goes wrong, tell Mr. Hay—he will let me know. God bless you ! Good-bye !" and the inexorable steam demon bore him away—away from home, and love, and sympathy.

He had gone forth without knowledge, without experience, to cope with a masterful world, with no better arms than hope, youth, and earnestness.

Even Liverpool was a wilderness of brick and stone to him ; but he found, without much difficulty, the Crooked Billet, and spent the evening writing letters to his mother and to the Rev. John Hay.

He entreated, very humbly, his mother's blessing on his enterprise, and her pardon for leaving her without a word of farewell, assuring her that he only did so to prevent the possibility of blame to herself from any fancied collusion. He was sanguine and hopeful, and finished with the observation (which is a noteworthy fact) that not one of his friends had attempted to dissuade him from his purpose—not even Caroline. There was hope for him abroad ; there was none at home.

This letter he enclosed to the curate, with many a charge to watch over Caroline as well as his mother and sister, the last being a very unnecessary item. Moreover, I rather think Daniel Dent and Miss Dent were shadowed forth as suspicious characters, ere he laid down his pen.

Two or three days elapsed before Fred was able to meet with Mr. Lyons, although he called several times. At length he bethought him to do what he should have done in the first instance—left the letter and made an appointment.

In the meantime he roved about the busy town, the bustle of which confounded him (the noise made no impression ; he had been seasoned to that in his father's factory), but his rambles were chiefly amongst the docks, where everything was new to him. Of course he was pounced upon as a greenhorn ; but, thanks to the advice he had received from Mr. Booth as well as Haigh, and his willingness to follow it, he picked up no sudden seafaring friends, and escaped the clutches of more than one seaport harpy who had thought him sure game.

He found Mr. Lyons—a bright-eyed, pleasant man, who had himself been half over the world—in conclave with a Captain Dambrill ; Caleb Booth's letter open before them.

It had certainly paved the way for his reception. Young men seeking to work their passage out rarely obtain audience of shipowners themselves, and still more rarely meet with the courtesy shown to him.

It so happened that the barque *Laura*, of which Captain Dambrill and Mr. Lyons were joint owners, was in port, taking in a cargo for Bahia, having Melbourne for its ultimate destination, and it was soon settled that Fred should have the desired berth on board her.

"You will want a 'kit,' Mr. Marsden," said Mr. Lyons; "and *to oblige my friend Mr. Booth*, who seems afraid lest you should fall among sharks—and all seaports swarm with them—a junior clerk shall pilot you among the shoals—in other words, find you a tolerably honest outfitter, if you will call to-morrow morning. And, hark ye, Mr. Marsden, you had better go on board on Saturday. If you get to work at once it will keep you out of mischief, and strange hands out of your pocket."

A wonderful smoother of his path this letter had been so far; but he soon discovered that Captain Dambrill had no favourites, and actual life on ship-board was no smoother for him than for the rest of the crew, and they found it rough enough.

Before closing the chapter, and consigning Fred to help at the stowage of cargo, among the gecks and jeers of sailors and shoremen, who thought the white-handed land-lubber had less pith in him than they afterwards found, or leaving him to the horrors of sea-sickness on a first voyage, it is to be recorded that on the Wednesday afternoon a strong, well-made sea-chest arrived at the Crooked Billet, addressed to "Mr. Frederick Marsden, carriage paid." It contained a letter from Haigh, conveying home news, and a hope that he would not be too proud to accept the chest he had made for him with his own hands, as a token of humble good-will.

CHAPTER XII.

ROSA'S SUNDAY CUSTOMER.

DANIEL DENT was anxious about Mrs. Booth's health; remarkably so for one unconnected with the family either by ties of blood or friendship; but his anxiety must have been of a peculiar kind, since in his brief interview with his sister in the dining-room at The Willows that Sunday morning, he observed, in the undertone which distinguished their conferences—

"It would be unfortunate if she got well too soon!"

Rather a singular remark that, but not stranger than the answer it drew forth.

"Oh, I don't think she will recover too fast, Daniel. Only three hours ago she said she should not live to dance at her daughter's wedding with that young Marsden, and I daresay she was right. She must know her own feelings better than Doctor Ashcroft;" and the sly look that went from her dull, light grey, upturned eyes into his, said more than the pulseless whisper.

Moreover, Daniel Dent's interest in Fred Marsden had not at all diminished since he met the latter on the Lion's Bridge. During this fraternal morning call, question and answer followed each other pretty closely, having a certain "F.M." for their basis, and when the clerk left the house at the end of a quarter of an hour, he nodded to his sister Harriet with a smirk of satisfaction, which implied that matters were shaping themselves precisely as he would have liked to have shaped them for himself.

Being a solitary bachelor, what more natural than a stroll through Atherton Park that Sunday afternoon, when turf, trees, lake, and sky were dressed in their brightest and best, as well as the saunterers he met? Was not the water cool and refreshing? Were not the lilies pure and the swans stately? Was not the grass soft and green? The song of birds inviting? What wonder, then, the charming park allured him a second time that day?

The greater wonder that he did not linger there on verdurous turf beneath the umbrage of some branching beech, instead of kicking up the dust along the narrow lanes which had their outlet in Tyldesley.

The Flaming Castle duly opened its hospitable doors when churches and chapels closed theirs, so that parched souls might

find refreshment, and dry sermons or dry dust be equally washed down.

It might be that very dust which drove Daniel Dent into its sanded parlour, just as the several congregations were dispersing, to astonish red-faced Rosa, the hostess, with a request for tea.

Not many tea-bibbers found their way into her hostelry, and the surprise in her manner as she answered, with slightly elevated hands and brows, "Tay! Well, yo' *con* have it!" clearly intimated that his request was unusual, and her compliance a favour.

Daniel Dent was not a wine-bibber. Not that he eschewed drinks because he disliked them; but he knew their effects of old, and as he sought to keep his own head clear and cool; and to build up a reputation for steadiness, he stuck to tea prominently.

If, like Mr. Thomas Marsden, he kept a private bottle in a private cupboard in his own room, he emptied it so slowly and so discreetly that no one was the wiser.

Pending the preparation of tea, he stood at the window looking out; and that being a corner house, his eye commanded the broad vista of Great Elliot-street and narrower Castle Hill at once. Even when the tray was brought in, it was placed at the corner of the table nearest to him, and leaning back in the well-waxed windsor-chair, he kept a sharp look-out, whilst he slowly sipped his tea with a moderation not consistent with hearty liking.

Rosa—she seldom went by any other name—was on easy-going terms with herself and the bulk of her customers, and silence, even in the presence of a stranger, was not her forte. She eyed the black crape on his new silk hat; she eyed the glossy black suit, which carried respectability—not fashion—in every seam; and as she put down a plate of fresh cress and crisp lettuce, saluted his ears with the unceremonious postulate—

"Yo'r Caleb Booth's clerk, aw reckon?"

A grave nod sufficing for assent, she rested her bare red arms on the table, standing and leaning opposite to him the while.

"Eh, but foine feathers dun mak foine birds! Aw hardly recollected yo'. An' heaw's Mrs. Booth? Aw reckon hoo'll not get ower her brother's deeath i' one whoile."

"I'm afraid not; the shock was very terrible. Mrs. Booth is keenly sensitive, and was greatly attached to her brother," and a sympathetic sigh accompanied the announcement.

"Ay, poor body, aw'm afeared so! Dun yo' knaw if Booth's

lass an' Marsden's lad are coortin'? Aw've heeard it, but yo' knaw it dees na' do to swallow a' one hears i' a public-heawse."

Rosa was not very deferential to her superiors.

"Marsden's lad?"—he looked innocently ignorant, though something like a flush had mounted to his forehead. "Marsden's lad? Do you mean the young gentleman who went off to Australia this morning? Mr. Frederick I think they called him."

"Eh! what?" and Rosa opened both her eyes and mouth in surprise. "Mester Fred! Gone to Australy! Dun yo' think his feyther knows?"

"I'm sure I cannot tell. I met the youth in Atherton Park this morning with a travelling bag, and heard his destination quite casually"—he did not think it necessary to say from his own sister.

"Eh, but aw'm sorry. He wur not a bad soort o' lad, chus what folks said'n. Aw reckon Mester Tummas has had a hand i' helpin' *him* off! He just loves th' young chap as th' divil loves holy wayter! Well, mebbe he'll find betther friends i' foreign parts than he found a' whoam."

Even Rosa Bradshaw, of the Flaming Castle, thought any change a good change, for she added—

"Th' lad wur sadly knocked abeawt here; for o' th' prayer-meetin's, an' th' bank notes put i' th' collection plate i' Ebenezer Chapel. But aw mun say nowt, fur owd Marsden's noan so bad a customer o' mine."

Daniel Dent pricked up his open ears.

"Does Mr. Thomas Marsden often patronise your establishment?" he asked, with an air of lofty indifference.

Rosa hesitated.

"Well—a—neaw an' then. He does slip in once in a way for a drop o' gin an' peppermint, poor young mon, when one of his attackts coom on."

A faint smile played for a moment on Mr. Dent's lips, but he only asked what he had to pay, and drawing a long-netted purse from his pocket, quitted the Flaming Castle, having left the coin in Rosa's hand, and his information in her ears, to set something else flaming besides the painted castle on her dingy sign.

Haigh's letter to Fred gave only a very faint account of the storm which had followed the discovery of his exit.

Old Marsden stamped, and fumed, and raved, and threatened to horsewhip him within an inch of his life when he came home; but Tom pointed to the empty drawers, and with a few pre-

liminary cracks of his prominent knuckles, remarked drily—"I think that does not look as if he meant to come home in a hurry."

"What does thah mean?" roared the tender father, his rough red face purpling with passion.

"Well," drawled Tom, with exasperating coolness, "I think he has put his threat into practice, and gone off."

"Gone off! Where?"

"Well, I should say, to sea," was Tom's provokingly quiet reply, whilst Mrs. Marsden sat on the bedside, sobbing. In all the years Sophia had been away from home, Fred had been the one solace of her life. Sophia, with her arms around her, crushed her own light muslin dress in her sympathetic attempts at consolation, though not daring to whisper the comfort she could have given. Emma, apparently unruffled as her brown balzarine, stood looking from one to another in a sort of blank amaze; and Ann, who had run upstairs to "see what a' th' uproar war abeawt," ran down again with a broad grin on her face, and the open avowal—

"Just sarves em roight! Aw'm deawnreet glad on it!"

But the irate parent stood aghast at the bare suggestion.

"Gone to sea! Art thah mad, Tom? How was he to get there without money? He had na a shilling to bless himself with, the vagabond!"

"Well—a—he had friends."

A covert glance at Sophia conveyed to the brave girl *one* of his sly meanings.

The father blazed up like tow as he caught fire at the *other* suggestion, and broke out into vituperations against the Booths; whilst Tom, cracking his fingers complacently, hutched up his ugly shoulders, and with a shiver led the way downstairs, a grin on his face broader than Ann's, if less human.

Never was seed of thistle or dandelion sown more lightly than the one Daniel Dent dropped at the Flaming Castle, and never seed germinated and fructified more rapidly.

When old Minshull came for the factory keys—which were, as usual, dropped to him through a short spout from Mr. Marsden's chamber window—at five o'clock the following morning, he bawled out—

"Is it true, measter, that Master Fred's gone off to Australia?"

"Australia!"

The scene of the previous night was repeated; yet for a wonder, in his frenzy, Marsden never accused his wife of conni-

vance; her grief was too genuine. Emma was quite out of the question; Sophia he never thought of, and Tom was too discreet to implicate *her*.

All his animus was now against Caleb Booth, increasing in vehemence as one person after another stepped into the miserable counting-house, through the day, on the flimsiest pretences, to echo Minshull's question, "Is it true?"

True! He hardly knew himself yet.

About four in the afternoon, his face blazing with the heat of the weather and the heat of his temper, he roared out across the factory yard, "Jim, put Bess in the gig! and sharpen, you old fool, or I'll lay the whip on you instead of the beast."

Jim—Jim-o'-th'-Bruck, as he was called, gardener, groom, stableman, messenger, odd man, all in one—sharpened under the threat, but once under cover of the stable wall, muttered, "You be hanged! I'll tak my own toime," with a pantomime more expressive than refined.

Tom was in the yard at the time, and having a shrewd guess for what the gig was required, he betook himself to the counting-house, and, finding a pretext to get rid of Minshull, the old clerk, did what no one else on the premises dared have attempted—told his father that he had best stay where he was, and not run his head against a post.

"What dost thah mean?" he asked, exasperated at even Tom's attempt to thwart him.

"Well, I don't think it's advisable to have a row with Caleb Booth whilst Hyde's business is fresh in his mind, and in other people's," cunningly suggested he.

The red face went livid, but the clenched hand, which he had jerked against his big chest as he put his question, dropped, and the fierce look went out of his eyes as Tom went on—

"Besides, you are not sure that Booth had any hand in helping off the young scapegrace; and it might be as well, you know, to let them think *you* had supplied him with cash, in case they have not done it."

You see, Tom supposed his five pounds was all Fred's viaticum, and *he* could not conceive friendship which should throw money away on a runaway lad.

"Suppose I go, father; your blunt honesty would be no match for Booth's deliberation. I'm not so easily put out—that is, when people don't try my nerves. I'll walk over—not ride; and I'll draw them out cleverly as any machine in our mill."

After some argument, Tom prevailed, and straightway walked over to The Willows—not to the house, but to the works.

Mr. Booth was not there.

A manager had not yet been appointed in the place of Mr. Hyde; but Tom Marsden found Daniel Dent doing the best he could to render such an appointment unnecessary—at least for the time being.

In the absence of his principal, Daniel Dent received Tom Marsden; and after some little fencing (Tom wanting to obtain information without asking questions, and Daniel burning to give information without risking Mr. Booth's good-will by *seeming* to tell tales) the two worthies, by some occult principle known only to such congenial spirits, arrived at the conclusion that their interest in the absence of the runaway was about co-equal. And, without an open word on the subject, the pair entered on a tacit alliance, and in due time, yet to come, laid their long heads together.

Poor Caroline, she saw only the clouds overhead, not the darker masses slowly rolling up from the distant horizon.

Young as she was, she had seen that inaction was eating Frederick's soul out like a canker; that he had undeveloped energies only needing opportunity to bear fruit, and she had submitted to his departure without opposition, solely because she saw in his Australian scheme a field for their exercise, whether the harvest came early or late.

But her pain was none the less a pain because duty bade her smother it. She felt his loss none the less keenly because she spoke cheerfully, nay, hopefully, to William of the pleasant letters to come, and the possible good fortune to be wrung from antipodean rocks and stones by his and her friend. Together they looked for sunbeams on the distant horizon to dispel the overhanging gloom; and perhaps it was as well.

Mrs. Booth, over-excited by the farewell of Frederick Marsden, as might have been expected, was not so well on the morrow; but she had a strong constitution, as Dr. Ashcroft said, and pulled up in a day or two. By the end of the week she was able to leave her bed, and sat up whilst Caleb read to her a sanguine letter of thanks from Frederick, who was about to join his ship.

There had been an enclosure for Caroline, but I incline to think that was kept for private perusal.

Of course, as soon as the dressmaking was done, Miss Dent's legitimate business at The Willows was at an end; but so useful had she been in the sick room, and so very assiduous, that Mrs. Booth seemed loth to part with her, and it was not until Mrs. Booth, after one or two slight relapses, ultimately got downstairs,

that she thought it politic to retire whilst she could leave the impression behind that she had stayed entirely for the benefit of the family.

She was a good workwoman, could fit the figure to a nicety, and adapt her style of trimming to the wearer; so that her long engagement with the Booths proved a general introduction for her.

"So quiet and unpresuming," "so thoroughly respectable," followed, from household to household, as the echo of her footsteps, I was about to say; but Harriet Dent's footstep did not echo, and the praise followed her very silence.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS DENT'S SUCCESS.

With Mrs. Booth's amendment came a natural demand for the dressmaker on her behalf; and a second time she became an inmate, Mrs. Booth having "conceived quite a liking for her."

By amendment I do not mean perfect recovery, but such a state of convalescence as enabled her to occupy an easy chair in that lightsome morning-room which had been their drawing-room prior to household expansion, and where she now elected to receive visitors and to issue orders, sometimes fussy, for Caroline and the maids to execute.

Her visitors were many. The Nields and Jacksons from Bedford, the Misses Marsh from The Mills, the Penningtons from Pennington Hall, Miss Eckersley from Eckersley Fold, who brought with her from Tyldesley-Banks * Sophia Marsden, the most welcome of all the callers—that is, if we except the Rev. John Hay, who, by some favourable conjunction of the stars, dropped in the same day and hour, and, after a pleasant chat with the invalid, had a similar impulse to carry his tall, slim person into the back parlour to visit William, whose preference for that homely room was strengthened by the influx of strangers to the other.

Neither Sophia nor the Rev. John was of that category: the vivacity of the one and the calm gravity of the other were equally welcome to him. They were both genuine, and he could open his heart to them without reserve. But he spoke almost in whispers, for Miss Dent, who carried her sewing—for companionship and possible usefulness to Mrs. Booth—into the morning-room, was liable to come in and out for materials, or the collection of loose parts, and Fred's caution yet lived in the boy's memory.

"I do miss uncle so much, Mr. Hay! You see, I have not been to school since I hurt my knee, and father does not know where to find a tutor for me in Leigh."

"He will find one easily enough by advertising in the *Manchester Guardian*, or perhaps the *Courier*."

"Yes, so father says, if we wanted one to live here; but I could not study too hard, and could only take a few lessons a

* In the vernacular, Tinsley-Bongs.

week; and besides I want some one who can teach me chemistry as well as Latin and mathematics. I want the chemistry most of all; it would be so useful in the works."

"How would you like me for a tutor, William?"

"You! Oh, Mr. Hay, you are joking."

"No, my boy, I seldom joke. My own chemistry requires brushing up, and it would be quite a pleasure to read and experiment with you—especially as you have so complete a laboratory under your roof."

Sophia and Caroline coming in at the time, William exclaimed with animation—

"Oh, Caroline, Mr. Hay has offered to teach me chemistry!"

Sophia, with a particular pinky complexion, was shaking hands with the curate, who had not released hers when she answered for Caroline—

"Never refuse a good offer, William."

"Are you likely to act on your own maxim, Miss Marsden?" asked Mr. Hay, still detaining her hands, and with a quick glance which said more than the words.

The pink became crimson as the brisk young lady archly responded—

"Certainly! But I should exercise my own judgment in deciding what was a good offer."

"What should you esteem a good offer, Miss Booth?" inquired the gentleman, not, however, caring to press the question too closely on Sophia just then.

"A true heart and a firm hand," was this time Caroline's ready answer for her friend.

"But what has all this to do with chemistry?" put in William, for whom the unintelligible by-play had little interest.

"My dear William," said Mr. Hay, "we are discussing alchemy, which is only a subtle and recondite form of chemistry. You will know more of it by-and-by."

Miss Dent had been in the room with a message from Mrs. Booth to Caroline, whose opinion she sought respecting that important matter, the depth of crape on her skirt.

The three were left together, and now William whispered confidentially to his friends, that he was afraid Caroline was fretting after Frederick and his uncle, though she would not let anyone know it; and she had had so much to attend to since his mother was ill, he was also afraid she was going to be ill too.

"Do you think you could spare her for awhile if she came to see me, William? I fancy the change might do her good," suggestively asked Sophia.

"I don't know," he deliberated. "You see, my knee has to be dressed every day, and Caroline has to do it now mother is ill."

"I could do it for you, Master William, if you would not mind," respectfully intimated the placid dressmaker, who had re-entered the room for her measure and her pins, adding, "and, if I may be allowed the remark, I do think your sister wants a change of some kind."

Before anyone could reply, a scream was heard from the drawing-room.

"Goodness! that was Caroline! Whatever can be the matter?" exclaimed Sophia, as she rushed out of the room and across the hall, closely followed by the clergyman. Miss Dent lingered a moment to hand William his crutches and assist him to rise.

They found Mrs. Booth fallen in her easy chair, stiff and rigid, her feet stretched out, her body bent, her head thrown back, her features set in a spasm of overmastering pain.

Caroline was bending over her in agony.

Miss Eckersley appeared affrighted.

"Oh, mother, mother! What shall I do?" cried Caroline, in impotent distress.

"Did Mrs. Booth's former fit resemble this?" asked Mr. Hay.

"I'm sure I cannot tell; I was too frightened myself to remember," answered Caroline.

"Mrs. Booth had a slightly similar attack the Sunday young Mr. Marsden went away. Mr. Ashcroft said it was over-excitement," replied Miss Dent, quietly. "I think a dose of the medicine he then prescribed remains upstairs. I will ascertain," and she was gone with more celerity than ordinarily.

The Rev. John Hay was gone also—for the doctor—and Becka, her tangled hair flying loose, ran across the bleach-croft for her master.

While Caroline and Sophia endeavoured to raise the head of the suffering woman, Miss Dent dexterously forced the medicine between her shut teeth, saying reassuringly, "There, she will be better shortly!" as she calmly wiped and replaced the spoon.

Before the curate returned with the doctor, whom he had to hunt up, the rigid muscles had relaxed, the curved back straightened, the inward pains subsided, and Mrs. Booth, faint and languid, was being carried to her own room, chair and all, by the strong arms of Jane and Becka, whose red eyes testified their troubled feelings.

Mr. Booth stood by, anxious, nervous, and helpless. Mr. Dent, who had followed him from the counting-house, made a third in the ambulance corps.

Mr. Ashcroft appeared puzzled. "What had Mrs. Booth taken?"

"Only a little chicken broth, and a little boiled chicken."

"Has she had her medicine regularly?"

"Yes!"

"Has she had an overdose, do you think?"

Caroline turned to Miss Dent.

"No! certainly not,"—Miss Dent produced the bottle—"you may see by the remaining quantity."

"H'm! It's odd!"

"What's odd, doctor?" inquired Mr. Booth.

"Oh! nothing, nothing!" Yet his brows came down, and he put his right thumb under his jaw and his index finger against his high cheek-bone in cogitation.

This conversation took place in the morning-room which had witnessed the attack, and after Mrs. Booth had once more been laid on a sick pillow.

"What has my patient been doing, or attempting to do, since I saw her three days ago?"

"She has done nothing," said Caroline, "but receive a few visitors."

"How many?" interrogated the doctor.

Caroline ran over the list.

"H'm, a nice levée for an invalid; and what more?"

Caroline was about to say "Nothing," when Miss Dent quietly interposed.

"Mrs. Booth has had a dress or two fitted and tried on; but I should think that would not fatigue her."

"Not fatigue her! A succession of visitors, and a dressmaker, and 'not fatigue her?'" echoed Mr. Ashcroft, sarcastically. Then, seeing a slight tinge on Miss Dent's colourless cheek, he added, apologetically, "I beg your pardon, miss; I forgot you were the dressmaker—only remembering how good a nurse you had been."

Miss Dent inclined her head in recognition of the compliment.

"What is this?" cried the doctor, espying a phial on the table, and taking it up.

"A dose of the remedy you prescribed nearly two months ago was in it, doctor. I recollected that it had not been thrown away, and am thankful it proved serviceable now."

"Upon my word, you are a very extraordinary young woman!" brusquely exclaimed the doctor. "But I have no hesitation in saying that to your recollection and promptitude Mrs. Booth, no doubt, owes her present recovery."

There was a feather for Miss Dent's cap, had she worn any! But I incline to think there was not a ruffled feather in the disconsolate canary's plumage but might have put that flaunting one to shame.

Mr. Booth and Caroline were profusely grateful. Sophia and Miss Eckersley retired to sing Miss Dent's praises, and even William forgot the "cats."

The Rev. John Hay was the only one who did not echo the doctor's encomium; possibly because he had not the same interest at stake.

Modestly, very modestly, Harriet Dent and her brother shrank from the praises lavished upon them; and when tangible presents followed in a day or two, as marks of a husband's and a daughter's gratitude, disclaimed their right to accept them. Nevertheless, the presents were not returned, and Miss Dent wore her handsome new black shawl at church the following Sunday.

Moreover, she grew to be a recognised fact in the sick-room, *vice* Caroline superseded; and Caroline, worn with much watching and many anxieties, was glad to be relieved, and hardly felt that she was being set aside.

Mrs. Booth had been a most notable housekeeper: one of those whom a speck of dust on a table, a stray crumb or a shred of linen on a carpet, would have set in instant motion; and Caroline not quite seventeen, was young to act as her deputy.

Mrs. Booth was also great in the matter of jams, pickles, and home-made wines, and her ample closet between the parlour and dining-room held quite an army of covered jars. There was a store to have served a larger family for years; but being relegated to her bed, and out of danger, she bethought herself how one fruit after another was passing out of season, and how nothing was added to the daily diminishing stock.

Her lamentations and regrets at her own prostration, when she had so much need to be up and doing, retarded her progress considerably, and stirred Caroline to undertake what she, in her inexperience, deemed a formidabletask, since her mother could not conceive the possibility of Jane's capacity in that branch of the culinary art.

August was drawing to a close, and the heat was intense, when Caroline turned apricots and sugar into a huge brass reserving pan over a glowing fire and made her first experiment.

The result was a half-satisfied "Ah! well, as good as could be expected from a beginner. You have not stirred them carefully enough; you have broken the fruit; you have made jam, not preserves."

Back went Caroline to the hot kitchen to try her skill on greengages, this time with better success. Then followed the covering and labelling, in which Master William helped.

Pickles—gherkins, beans, cauliflowers, and onions—followed in quick succession; yet must she not neglect her brother's knee, her mother's many little wants, nor must she fail to be neat and orderly to receive Dr. Ashcroft or other visitors.

The quick round of duties certainly kept her from brooding unduly on her absent lover, and equally forbade her acceptance of Sophia Marsden's hearty invitation.

But the close confinement, the heat of a broiling kitchen, the frequent running up and down stairs, told upon her health, and when September came, bringing damsons and blackberries to preserve, apple-jelly to make, and walnuts to pickle, her strength gave way.

By good fortune Jane caught her, fainting, as she hung over the second pan of damsons, and carried her in her strong arms out into the garden, leaving the damsons on the fire to their fate.

Of course they burned, and Mrs. Booth, again downstairs, with an invalid's quick scent detected the accident, and with an invalid's irritability, despatched Miss Dent to say the fruit was spoiling and wasting.

But William's nimble crutch was heard in the hall as he crossed Miss Dent's path bent on a separate errand.

He had seen from the bay window Jane carry his darling sister to a garden seat, and sprinkle her with water brought by Becka from the fountain; and, divining the cause, hurried to remonstrate with his mother on the danger of letting Caroline overwork and overheat herself.

The mother was stronger than the housekeeper—her regrets now took another turn, and the invalid, who would never again be anything else, had a fresh grievance.

Miss Dent again came to the rescue. If Miss Booth would attend to her dear mother, she would do all Mrs. Booth could require in replenishing her housewifery stores; and such faith had Mrs. Booth in Miss Dent that she gave glad permission.

Miss Dent was equal to the occasion; and once free of the kitchen tossed up all manner of dainties to suit an invalid's palate.

She was thereupon voted an invaluable housekeeper, and was finally offered that which she had schemed to obtain—a permanent home at The Willows.

Another fresh arrangement had also been made..

William's studies—chemical and general—had been resumed, and the Rev. John Hay was the tutor.

CHAPTER XIV.

AFFECTIONATE TOM.

VIOLENT, long-continued passion is not considered conducive to health, especially when, as in Mr. Marsden's case, the wrathful man is full-blooded, full-bodied, and has little or no neck.

When Tom Marsden got home that Monday afternoon from his voluntary expedition to Booth's bleach works, he found his father sitting in his chintz-covered easy-chair in the kitchen, with a redder face than usual, and a very strong determination of—temper to the head.

Mr. Tom's first salutation was—

"You look very poorly this afternoon, father."

Now, one of Mr. Marsden's pet foibles was valetudinarianism—a foible which his son Tom fostered by all means and on all occasions. He was the picture of robust health, yet he fancied himself a prey to a host of diseases, known and unknown. He paid a hundred pounds a year to a Dr. White, of Manchester, to keep him in health, and filled the closet and mantel-shelf in his own bedroom with quack medicines to supplement the doctor at his own discretion.

However, the worry and excitement of the foregoing week had preyed upon him, and the last straw—Fred's escape—had broken the camel's back. He really was ill, or in a fair way to be so.

"Ay, Tom, lad, I feel very badly. I've taken thirteen of Morrison's pills, and don't feel a bit better."

"If I were you, I'd go and see White to-morrow; he does little enough for his hundred a year."

"So I intend, lad, and I shall give him a good ricking. Here's another quarter due, an' I've not had a dozen bottles of physic from him all the while. If it had na been for old Solomon's 'Balm of Gilead,' and Morrison's pills, and th' Old-field-lane doctor's red-bottle * to rub me with, I might have been dead for all the good he's done me. I feel badly now;" and he looked with a very lachrymose air towards the fire, which the heat of the weather, supplementing that of temper, forbade him to approach.

Ann was turning a potato-cake on the bakestone over the fire.

* Dr. Taylor, of Oldfield-lane, Manchester, was a bone-setter of local celebrity; and his "red-bottle" a well-received embrocation.

He must have caught an incipient smile on Ann's countenance, he started up with so much savagery, exclaiming—

"What art thah grinning at, thah born fool? Is thy master's illness a thing to laugh at?"

"Aw laughed at nowt. Aw nobbut looked deawn at th' tater cakes. Aw've eneauf t' do t' moind mi wark," was Ann's surly remonstrance.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Marsden—who sat with red eyes and trembling hands patching a sheet by the window, where Emma also sat composedly darning stockings—put in a word for the ruffled domestic.

"I don't think, Mr. Marsden, Ann would laugh at anyone's illness; the——"

"Mind thy own business! Who asked thee to think? Shut thy ugly mouth with that!"

And up he snatched a half-baked cake from the bakestone and threw it across the kitchen at his wife's head. Instinctively she drew back, and the hot cake stuck like a plaister on the side of Emma's face and head.

She started from her seat with surprise and pain, a quick spark struck from her dull eyes, and her nostrils seemed to pant; but the flash was momentary. She quietly put the broken cake on the dresser, and left the room to compose her disordered hair and lave her smarting cheek; but as she went, she, the emotionless Emma, muttered to herself, with subdued force, "I'll not endure this much longer."

Tom had been rubbing his hands, and cracking his sharp knuckles, as if he rather enjoyed this little diversion. As his father sat down, gripping the arms of his chair with both hands, while the muscles of his face contracted by a sharp pain which shot through his head, that excellent young man, taking no notice of the interruption, turned his father's thoughts into a new channel, though scarcely a smoother one, by saying—

"It was very fortunate I went in your stead, father, for Booth wasn't there, and I saw only that clerk of his. My word, isn't he a sharp one—and a close one too. You'd have been no match for him. That chap knows more than he cares to tell; but I got out of him that he met Master Fred yesterday morning on the Lion's Bridge, with a carpet bag, and that somebody—he didn't say who"—here his eyes furtively sought those of Sophia, now setting the tea things—"had supplied the early riser with cash. He had five pounds at the very least."

Mrs. Marsden clasped her hands.

"Thank God!" she ejaculated, in a low but devout tone.

"Mr. Dent met him after church in Booth's trap, with Mr. Booth and William; so if he's off, it's pretty plain who's helped him off."

"Ay, d——n him! He's as bad as Hyde, putting his spoke into my wheel. But I'll be up-sides with the old bird-stuffer yet."

Ill though he was, he sat down to tea with a hearty appetite, supplementing potato-cakes with cold tongue and broiled ham, as if he had never dined.

Food and physic were the two things he never grudged—at least, he never grudged them to himself; he was somewhat less lavish in helping others, and no surreptitious rasher could have been cut from ham or flitch without immediate detection and condign punishment. And never a shilling could Mrs. Marsden save out of her housekeeping. Butcher, grocer, miller, &c., supplied the goods, and he paid the bills. But he saw the goods weighed when they were sent in, and turned his own key on the store-closet, himself giving out what he considered sufficient for daily consumption.

After eating to repletion, with a seasoning of sneers and sarcasm to his women-folk, and harsh invectives hurled against his absent son, then alone in Liverpool, he took up his pipe, neither going to the Flaming Castle nor to prayer meeting, as was his wont.

But the pipe did not draw freely—he broke it on the bar; then tried another, with like result. Then he essayed a nap, but his head ached, and he could not sleep.

"I think, father, you've taken cold. You'd better put your feet in hot water, and have some vinegar to your head, and then, if you'll go to bed, I'll fettle you some ale, and bring it up to you hot—it may help you to sleep," suggested Tom, with much solicitude.

Sophia darted a quick glance over the edge of her book at the affectionate son, but he did not see it.

"Eh, Tom, thou'rt a thoughtful lad. I wonder how long it would have been before these shiftless women-folk would have offered to do as much?"

"Well, father, you see"—and the knuckles cracked one by one as the whining answer left Tom's lips—"I'm such a poor weak invalid myself, it's only natural I should be the first to think of your sufferings."

But Tom's filial suggestion put the whole female staff in commotion at once.

Tom himself got the vinegar from the beer cellar; but linen rags had to be found for its application, water drawn into the foot-bath, flannels heated to encase the feet, a blanket aired to

enclose the patient, and the bed warmed to receive him when all was done; and had anyone ventured to sit down or pursue her own avocations meanwhile, thinking too many nurses were in the way, it would have been an act of treason or disloyalty.

When all was done, and the big man between the aired sheets, with the cooling vinegar on his hot head, Tom was ready with the ale, sweetened, spiced, and heated in a tin like a long inverted cone, which nestled securely amid the glowing coals, and Tom himself carried it to his father's bedside, and if he added a few drops of laudanum by the way, to induce sleep, who was the wiser?

Oh, a wonderfully thoughtful son was Tom!

Very composing was that draught of ale. The turbulent invalid lapsed into slumber, and snored satisfactorily.

But Sophia had none of the ale, and perhaps that might account for her restlessness in the night, when she turned the handle of Tom's locked door, and fastened the hasp of the back landing window, before she went back to bed and to sleep.

By ten o'clock all the family were supposed to be abed and asleep; it was quite eleven before she began to dream, and long past four on Tuesday morning before her dreams were dispersed by a shower of gravel against her bedroom window.

A second shower had rattled against the panes before she lifted the corner of the linen blind and showed her face.

A few minutes sufficed to find her with a shawl round her shoulders unfastening the window she had previously secured, and admitting a fashionably-dressed man with a moustache and imperial.

Who was this man Sophia admitted during the hours of sleep?

"You'll do this once too often, Miss Sophy," he hissed between his teeth.

"*You'll* do this too often, Master Tom!" was the prompt retort.

The dress might not be Tom's, but the voice was.

He drew a key from a pocket and applied it to Tom's door, which it opened and locked again when he was safely inside; and though the well-cut trousers and coat, padded to disguise the angles of his form, had never come from a Tyldesley shop-board, but in every stitch and seam told of St. Ann's Square, Manchester, or Bold-street, Liverpool, it was Tom who stood erect in them—Tom in a glossy silk hat, Tom with a great round knob of a breast-pin in his satin scarf, Tom with a false moustache on his lip, a dandified tuft on his chin, with his head erect and shoulders well down.

And where had Mr. Thomas Marsden been in this guise?

That was more than his sister Sophia knew, whatever she might guess.

Let us watch him after he cast off his ordinary slough, and came out a blooming sprig of fashion—as it were, a fluttering hawk-moth—before his sister hasped the window, and made secret return impossible.

The trellis which had been a ladder of freedom to Fred served the same purpose for him; yet not down the drive and through the gate did *he* take his way, but through a convenient gap in the hedge and over the upland meadow; and then, when well clear of his own home, turned to gain the road which led to the excavation known as "The Sand Pits."

It was not so late but now and then a straggling wayfarer passed him on the road—men to whom his ordinary aspect was familiar; but patent leather boots and Stubb's broadcloth had transfigured him.

The quarries were, however, lonely and desolate enough. There was little fear of his meeting there man or woman at that hour, who had not, like himself, an appointment to keep.

And it was hardly the place for an appointment, unless secrecy was imperative.

On every side, hard, bare, angular, precipitous walls of sandstone frowned upon the intruder, and made the streaks of moonlight precious.

Within the recesses of the sand pits was a rude hut, or shed, built for the convenience of the quarrymen, whose tools it held, and whose meals might be taken, and even cooked therein.

The door was clumsy and the latch was rude; but Tom, who had whistled, or rather cooed like a wood-pigeon without any response, put his hand on the latter and pushed the door. He drew a small dark lantern from his pocket, let out the imprisoned rays, and seemed disappointed at the emptiness of the hut.

"Nelly! Nelly!" he called, but not loudly, lest the stone walls should hear. As he called, a smart young girl, who had been hiding at the back of the hut, ran in and threw herself into his arms—into the arms of Tom Marsden, who on his father's hearth would have scared love from the most confiding, credulous being in creation, always excepting that same hoodwinked father.

It was not a very delightful lover's bower; but then love can make an Arcadia anywhere, and this, moreover, was not a girl born to the pomps and luxuries of the social world. Her parents were humble, hard-working people; her father was that very

Scholes whose evidence told so much against Mr. Marsden at the inquest, and who would have been dismissed from the mill *instanter* but for the more crafty policy of Tom.

"Wait awhile till the thing's blown over, and then get rid of him. It's easy to frame an excuse," he had said.

Nelly's mother had been a reeler, and she was a reeler too, and worked in Marsden's mill, where Tom, in his sometime office of overlooker, had cast the spell of his evil eye upon her.

She had been motherless many years; and her father, feeling that he had a double responsibility, thought that necessitated double vigilance, and in mistaken duty strained the point of strictness to severity.

So anxious was he to keep her from contamination that he all but debarred her from association with girls of her own age and class, and of course her employment cut her off from all other. Then he forbade finery, as a temptation and a snare; and she, having all a woman's love of company and colours, was set a-longing, as was our first mother Eve.

And, like Eve, the devil was not far from her elbow.

He came in the guise of her master's son, his favourite son, his eldest son, and consequently heir, if not to

"His mother's graces,"

certainly to that which was more real and tangible—

"His fathers's fortune and his places;"

and he advanced with all the subtlety of the serpent of old.

He laid himself out to win Nelly Scholes just as a skilful general might plan to besiege a city.

His first advances were silent. When he had sharp words for other indolent or inattentive lasses at their reels, he passed her over without a word of reproof. Then he began to commend; then he whispered that she was pretty; then that she was too good to associate with her fellows:—her looking-glass had told her the former; her father told her the latter: his words were only confirmations.

Then he began to pity her for being condemned to wear dingy colours and never a flower or a trinket, and perhaps a gay kerchief, or a coral necklace accompanied his "pity." And then came regrets that she should follow an occupation so far beneath a pretty girl, who might do so much better.

And bit by bit he conquered her shyness, and led her to believe that her master's son was in love with her, and would in course of time make her mistress of the mansion on the hill-side.

And she, to requite the condescension which stooped to mate with one of his own workpeople, and the love which would lift her up to his level, gave him all her love and trust.

Secret meeting was a natural consequence. She from the first hid his gifts, and kept his flatteries from her rigid father, with an instinctive dread of stern prohibition which should have been its own warning; and there was no need of a second word from Tom to make her understand what would be the fury of *his* father if their love was discovered.

Did he love her—love the pretty, foolish, vain ambitious reeler? Was there one genuine living pulse in his mechanical heart?

Did Tom Marsden ever love anything but himself? Had Tom Marsden ever any higher hope or aim than his own gratification?

CHAPTER XV.

REPUTATION.

This was by no means Tom Marsden's first appointment at the old Sand Pits, and the old hut could have told of more than one midnight carouse had there been listeners to the audible protests of the door hinges, and the cavil of the stubborn latch. But such of his intimates as had any reputation to lose were sure to keep his secret—if they knew it—for their own sakes, and those who were not troubled with that commodity were pretty well paid to preserve his. For he assumed to be a devout man, as strict an observer of religious ordinances as his father; and his out-of-door reputation as a class-leader was at stake—or he thought so. Hypocrites never know how much they are suspected until the *dénouement* comes.

Long as he had gone masquerading after nightfall in his elaborate costume, and far as he had extended his goings, even his nocturnal associates only guessed at his identity; and though he had passed on the road men who knew his stooping, shrunken, meanly-clad figure by day, no one had seen Tom Marsden in the erect, well-dressed man, whose long thin lips and skinny chin were hid by drooping moustache and imperial. And no one suspected his escapades less than his own father.

But Nelly Scholes was the first pure girl he had induced to meet him at his solitary haunt—so solitary that murder might have been done, and the crime hidden without fear of detection or intrusion.

And this was her first visit.

Her unsuspecting father, sleeping heavily, as the toilworn do, especially those who wash their porridge supper down with a mug of ale, was easily eluded. A door left on the latch would facilitate her return.

"Oh, Tom—dear Tom!—aw thowt yo' would never come!" she ejaculated, in the midst of her caresses.

"Why, Nelly, dear? I am not far behind my time;" and he held a handsome gold watch in the light of the lantern, which he had set down on the rude table, but without releasing her from his clasp. Indeed, he held her in a firmer grip, as if a new sense of possession had come over him.

"Ah, but th' place is so lonely, an' th' moon looks so cowd, it fair makes me didder;" and she shivered as she spoke, but with apprehension more than cold.

"Then wrap this round you," he said, unfolding a showy shawl which he had brought with him—the common little thing she had worn Spanish fashion over her head as she came thither had dropped to the ground. "I bought it the last time I was in Bolton. Didn't I tell you I had something for you if you would come for it; and wouldn't our Sophy give her ears for its fellow?"

The girl fell into the trap. He had brought her a shawl which his own sister might covet. She felt its texture, admired pattern and colours as well as she could by the lantern's imperfect light; and then he bade her pay him with kisses—payment that the lowliest woman can make without offending the most fastidious lover's ear; though Tom was not fastidious, his ear was not delicately attuned, was too familiar with dialect, and too imperfectly educated to quarrel with it when it fell from pretty red lips, and he could press them in return.

Then he drew from his pocket a card-board box, and from its nest of pinky down released a pair of earrings which shone and sparkled wonderfully like the diamonds for which she took them. Not the only paste she mistook for a gem.

And then, after more shy kisses, from the same box he brought a ring—an absolute golden wedding-ring—and a keeper, and put them on her finger with much ardour, real or assumed, and called her "wife" and "Mrs. Marsden," till the girl half fancied she was his wife, and was half beside herself with love and gratitude.

Had she had all her wits about her, weak and credulous as she was, she must have been struck with his knowledge of the hut and its appurtenances, never the result of inspiration.

Summer nights are cold, even for lovers; and very cold for such lovers as Tom Marsden. He knew where the men kept their small store of fuel, and kindled a fire on the rude hearth. He found a jug and a tin can, and after a few minutes' absence came back with water from a spring. He had brandy in a pocket flask, and having drunk himself, he invited Nelly to partake, as he said, to "keep off the chill," the night was so raw and cold. Cakes and other confections he produced from a bag he carried, and altogether he treated her as sumptuously as circumstances would permit.

Ever and anon Nelly would start and rise, and say she must be gone, her father might wake and miss her; or be lying awake

and hear her lift the latch, and she trembled at the thought. But his arm brought her back, little loth, to the rough bench on which they sat together. He drew marvellous pictures of the future: regretted the necessity for secrecy—he had already broken down the hedges of filial obedience—pressed more and more brandy upon her, until, between his blandishments and the spirits, she lost what little sense she had taken with her.

When she stole into her father's cottage in the grey dawn to hide shawl, earrings, and the other rings, she had given a promise which was one more secret to be hidden.

And Tom Marsden went back to the square mansion on the hill-side, cracking his knuckles, and exulting in the prospect of having pretty Nelly Scholes with him during his summer trip to Southport.

No galvanic battery could have given his elation such a shock as did Sophia in hasping the landing window!

It was not the generous enamoured lover who crept into his chamber, not the man proud of conquest, but the snarling cur conscious of detection in his wrong-doing, and of a vigilant eye upon him.

What she knew, or how much she knew of his secrets, was *her* secret, and that constituted her power over him.

It might have been well for Nelly Scholes had Sophia Marsden known more than she did.

Mr. Marsden slept heavily the next morning. Horse and phaeton had been brought to the gate and taken back again an hour before he awaked, and no one dared to disturb him, though his breathing was loud and stertorous.

When he did awake he seemed dull and heavy; he breakfasted with less relish than usual, and when horse and phaeton came round again he made Jim-o'-th'-Bruck get up beside him to drive.

He customarily put up at the Thatched House in Market-street, when he attended the Manchester market, to be near the Exchange and amongst the country manufacturers; but that day he had the vehicle stopped at his surgeon's, and then he had no cause to complain that the doctor neglected him.

Those were the days when cupping and bleeding were freely resorted to; and with little waste of time or speech, Dr. White proceeded to cup Mr. Marsden at the back of the neck, there being marked symptoms of incipient apoplexy. He gave him medicine and advice, the first item of which was to "go home, and not to the Exchange," and the second to "keep cool."

"I will ride over to Tyldesley to-morrow to ascertain how you progress, and hope to find you better," were the doctor's parting words.

You see, Mr. Marsden was a valuable patient, and Dr. White could be active and attentive enough when there was need for his services.

Marsden's burly figure and scraps of Scripture were missed from 'Change that Tuesday. Half paralysed with terror, he had driven home, stopping only at Swinton to dine and bait the horse. Dr. White's promptitude had alarmed him, and his very efforts to keep quiet and calm produced a mental perturbation anything but conducive to recovery, for he was timid and cowardly, as all such men are.

First he ordered Jim to get over the ground quickly, "there was no time to lose;" then he bade him drive slowly, he was "being shaken to a jelly;" anon he would tell him to "whip the beast—he's crawling like a snail." Up this hill he was to drive quickly, down that slowly; here the horse was to "have his head;" there Jim must "hold him in with a tight hand," until Jim felt half inclined to throw down the reins altogether, and leave Smiler to take his own pace to the stable.

The stopping of the chafing animal at his journey's end was the signal for Sophia and Ann to hurry down to the gate and assist him to alight, and carry to the house any packages and wraps he might bring; for Emma to follow at her leisure, and for Mrs. Marsden to wait expectant at the hall door at the coming of her lord and master.

This was the usual programme on those rare occasions when he drove on to the house, his ordinary custom being to alight at the Flaming Castle and turn in there, Jim being in waiting to take charge of horse and vehicle.

Yet this was generally late at night, when he professed not to harass Smiler with the descent of the steep hill with the heavy phaeton behind him; "for you know," he would say, "the merciful man is merciful to his beast," and the coach-house lay somewhat midway in a back street.

But to return from Tuesday's market in the middle of the afternoon was so unprecedented that the bustle to the gate was more feverish than usual. His ailments and complaints were common. No one imagined his overnight illness more than chimerical; and the first fancy of mother and daughter both was that disastrous tidings of Fred had been gathered by him in Manchester.

Timely cupping had relieved his face of its superabundant

colour; there was blood on the white shawl which encased throat and chin.

"You have had an accident!" flashed swiftly through Sophia's brain and lips.

With infinite contempt Jim-o'-th'-Bruck growled out,

"We'n hed no accedent! Th' mester's nobbut bin blooded by th' doctur."

Still the big, timorous man, weakened by his own fears and the clamour of his own conscience, put down one foot after the other, slowly and cautiously; then laid a heavy hand on each of the shoulders nearest him, to be helped up the steep incline to the door, groaning at every step he took.

"Permit me," said a kindly voice behind them; and the Rev. John Hay, displacing Sophia with a word and a smile, offered his aid in her stead.

A flush overspread the young lady's countenance; whether from the pressure of her father's heavy hand or the curate's lighter touch, I will not presume to say. At all events, a glance of swift intelligence shot from the curate's eye to hers, which relieved her mind no little.

In Mr. Marsden's frame of mind and state of body, the advent of the young clergyman appeared little less than a special providence; and when the parlour sofa and a pile of pillows had him in their safe keeping, and when his medicine had been duly administered, he insisted on their visitor's stay, dismissing the women-folk to provide tea and leave them in quiet.

And then, having a spiritual pastor all to himself, specially sent for his peculiar need, he proceeded to disburden his mind of his "manifold sins and transgressions" with a fluency and vagueness peculiar to religionists of his type, and sought consolation from the astonished curate, albeit he was not a member of the same church.

And he *must* have been in bodily fear to do that!

Tom, coming in apparent haste from the mill, was curious to know the clergyman's business there; Mr. Marsden, in his concern for himself, never once thought of it.

"Passing the gate when father came," was all the answer Sophia vouchsafed, as she picked cress for tea, although she and her mother were then in possession of Fred's first letters from the Crooked Billet, and Mr. Hay had been the carrier; and Mrs. Marsden was on her knees in her chamber, thanking God that her dearest boy was neither moneyless nor friendless; and although torn from her side, and cast amongst strangers, had at least escaped from his tormentors.

CHAPTER XVI.

"MY DAUGHTER! OH, MY DAUGHTER!"

MR. MARSDEN'S illness was real, and of some duration—lasting much longer than it might have done, on account, not only of his own irritability and his terror of death, but of the quack nostrums which he persisted in taking on his own responsibility, in defiance of the doctor.

And how assiduous was Tom during the whole time, though himself, so he said, in the very last stage of nervous debility, almost dying for lack of sea air and sea-bathing.

Tom, however, got caught in his own cobweb.

So much concerned was the actual invalid for the pretender, that he insisted on his swallowing dose after dose of quack medicine. Then he called the attention of Dr. White to his son's desperate state; and when the doctor, too old a stager to be gulled, sent the younger patient the most nauseous potions he could possibly concoct, the elder patient, for the very love he bore his son, insisted on their being swallowed in his own presence. And Master Tom had no alternative but to submit to the infliction, or lose the character for valetudinarianism he had been at such pains to establish.

Besides, it was a critical time, and there were many interests at stake.

His father's will was unmade; and he had no mind that it should be made, unless he could himself dictate or control its provisions.

He was the eldest son, and knew his rights as such, and would be sure to maintain them to the letter. And never was he so regular in his attendance at the mill—never so vigilant in seeing that others did their duty as now, when the chances stood in favour of its speedily passing into his own hands.

It was not easy to keep midnight appointments at the Sand Pits, now that domestic nurses were on the alert, or on the move; so there was less cause to lie in bed late with nervous headaches. But he locked up the mill himself now; and if Nelly Scholes, evading her father, loitered half an hour after the other mill hands were gone, or found her way thither after dark, it was only known to herself and her very alluring lover, Tom Marsden.

The cotton-spinner's illness brought round him a flock of chapel-goers, more or less devout. The worthy minister was constantly at his bedside; special prayer meetings were held in his behalf; and in his sickness he found himself of more importance than when up and about, mingling scraps of devotional philosophy alike with his bargains, his petty economics, his querulous complaints, and flashes of anger.

He was supposed to have amassed a large fortune. He was in the habit of salving his conscience after an uncommonly hard bargain, or an uncommon domestic display, or any other little peccadillo in which "the world, the flesh, or the devil" got the better of him, by a large donation to the chapel fund; and now that he was likely to leave that fortune behind him, his possible will troubled those individuals especially concerned in the chapel debt and its fund.

Mr. Hay came occasionally also, drawn thither by many strings. As a pastor, he was interested in Mr. Marsden's spiritual welfare; as a friend, was desirous to obtain justice from the father for his youngest son; and as a man, held tender sentiments towards Miss Sophia, not yet expressed.

Mr. Chorley had been sent for, and a will drawn up; but Simeon Marsden was in no humour to sign, and locked the parchment himself in a desk brought to him as he lay there groaning, and which was kept on a table at his bedside.

Again the solicitor was summoned and a fresh will made, and again another, as conscience pricked or influence swayed him. One he signed, and tore up three days afterwards.

But the crisis passed, and then there was no more thought of wills; albeit the charmer, in the shape of mortal Tom, "charmed never so wisely."

September was nearly a week old when Ann was free to take down the dimity bed-hangings, and otherwise let air into the close invalid chamber, her master being fairly afoot, and able to growl at them all from his easy-chair downstairs—the only result of his narrow escape from death being a fifty-pound note sent as a thank-offering to the chapel, and duly paraded from the pulpit.

In a day or two he was able to cross over to the factory, leaning on the shoulder of dutiful Tom, who appeared to totter beneath the weight.

"Oh, what a relief!" cried Sophy, shutting the hall door as the gate closed upon them, and capering up the hall, and from room to room she gave vent to her exuberant spirits in an extemporised paraphrase of "Oh, be joyful, joyful!"

"Sophy, my dear," expostulated Mrs. Marsden, mildly, as she cleared away the litter attendant on the convalescent toilette, "do not be irreverent, and remember Mr. Marsden is your father."

"Remember it! He never lets us forget," said Emma, with a frown.

"Oh, my dear mother, I never forget *that*," sportively cried Sophia; and she looked up at Mrs. Marsden with a comically expressive smile. "I never put on an antiquated bonnet, or a turned dress, and break the tenth commandment in sighing for Julia's new hat, or Jessie's new silk, without feeling the fifth commandment oppressive; and," her tone sobering, "I never think of my darling brother Fred, driven from home and country, and from the girl he loves, without a strong temptation to break that also."

The mention of Fred brought tears to the mother's eyes, and "Sophy—Sophy!" was all her reproof.

Demure Emma put up her hands.

"I wonder what the Rev. John Hay would say if he heard you now?" she said, in rebuke of indecorum. "He would be shocked at your giddy and profane talk."

Sophia's ears reddened and tingled, and perhaps so did her finger-tips. Her tongue, however, simply replied—

"I cannot tell what Mr. Hay would say, but I know what he *might* say."

Emma looked up from her stitching inquiringly.

"He *might* say," Sophia continued, "'Parents, provoke not your children *in* anger, lest they be discouraged;'" and her sharp little nod seemed to say, "I've put *you* down!"

Emma's face settled into more than common gravity, and some minutes elapsed before she woke from her fit of musing. The text had evidently struck some hidden chord in her self-contained heart.

"Is not that a new reading?" she asked at length.

"Perhaps it is," answered her quick-witted sister. "It is *my* reading, and I think it is the true one. You can submit it to your pious leader when next you go to class."

It was Emma's turn to flush now. For once her self-command was at fault. Faint as was the colour, it caught Sophy's eye.

"Eh! What! O-h-h! Um!" and away she ran, with a merry fancy in her head, to help Ann with the dinner by making a tapioca pudding for the convalescent.

Tom had reason to congratulate himself that day. His seldom-satisfied father was loud in commendations of his business tact and the general conduct of the factory, which he had expected

to find all "sixes and sevens" for lack of his own vigilant supervision; and the junior who had managed the mill, as he conceived, for his own sole benefit, did reap some sort of harvest.

Twenty pounds more were added to the fifty already given for his delayed Southport trip, and a future partnership was talked of.

Assent was also given to his proposition that he should go in a week or ten days to his favourite watering-place, as the season was advancing and the weather might break up.

Some three or four days before Tom Marsden started, and whilst his private preparations were in progress, the factory hands were startled by Scholes running from house to house, and from street to street, inquiring for his daughter Nelly.

She had gone to bed as usual overnight, he said; was not up to get breakfast ready; he found her bed undisturbed; but, so far as he could tell, none of her garments were missing.

The man was distracted. She was his all-in-all. A precious remembrance of his dead wife. If he had been strict, he had at least meant to be truly kind. And even now he blamed himself, not for too stringent a rule, but for lack of sufficient vigilance, more rigid supervision.

He went to Mr. Marsden; laid his pitiful tale before him, asked for help to seek his daughter—and the master, whose liberal thank-offering for returning health was the theme of Tyldesley gossip, turned on the man with scorn and invective.

"What should I know of thi daughter? Haven't I been lying at death's door for months? And weren't thah one of the lying scoundrels that helped to throw me there? Daughter, indeed! If the crook of my finger would bring th' lass back, I wouldn't bend it. Fathers should take better care of their daughters. I take good care of mine."

"An' of yo'r sons, too, aw reckon," retorted the man, sternly, roused by the inhumanity of his employer; and seeing that the taunt struck home, he added, "An' aw told no lies at th' inquest, Mester Marsden. Aw spoke th' truth, *an' yo' know it.*"

They were in the counting-house, a rude sort of a place, with whitewashed walls, bare floor, and no furniture save a tall wooden desk and a couple of stools. It had one door opening from the yard, and close to its entrance; and a second at right angles opening into the body of the mill.

"Turn him out! Turn him out!" spluttered Simeon Marsden, in a rage. But there was no one at hand. Minshull had just gone into the yard, and Tom was rating a young scavenger by the side of a mule in the spinning-room.

"Aw'll torn mysen eawt, Mester Marsden, an' nivvor will aw touch wage o' thine agen, if aw clem. An' luk to thy own dowters. Fur o' thi big heawse, an' o' thi dirty brass, they'n nobbut wenches o' flesh an' blood, an' they'n noan so pleasant a whoam if o' be true one yers. An' if aw've lost a lass yo've lost a lad, an' a foine lad, wurth a hundret o' th' sneakin' whelp i' th' mill. An' so we're even onyhow, mester!"

And the man, turning on his heel with a contemptuous nod, ran out of the counting-house and the yard, and up Castle Hill, almost overturning Caleb Booth's clerk at the very factory gate.

Recovering his balance, he looked back after the man, and, half shutting his curious grey eyes, and drawing his close lips and brows closer, muttered to himself—

"I thought I knew the fellow. What's in the wind now?"

He found Mr. Marsden fuming with suppressed rage. He was not wont to be bearded in his own territory, and by his own workmen.

Tom entering the counting-house at the same time through the other door, their eyes met before a word had passed, or Mr. Marsden was aware of Dent's presence.

"Why weren't thah there, Tom?" cried the elder, testily. "Thah'rt never here when thah'rt wanted! Here's been that infernal Scholes blackguarding me like a pickpocket, because that brazen hussy of his has run off, and I refused to look after her for him. As if I'd nothing to do with my brass but throw it away seeking runaway wenches! What's the lass to me?"

Daniel Dent's eyes had never left Tom's face. He saw a faint glimmering of a change cross it as Scholes was mentioned, and an avoidance of his glance as the errand of Scholes was blurted out by angry Mr. Marsden; and the signs of restlessness or shiftiness, slight as they were, were not lost upon the watchful clerk. He wondered what the girl was to Thomas Marsden.

A word from Tom made Mr. Marsden turn round and pull himself together. He was another man before strangers.

Mr. Dent's business, which was monetary, and that of his employer, was soon transacted, and he took his leave and his way to the Flaming Castle, certain to hear the gossip of the place —perhaps fall in with the insulted father *there*.

Sure enough Scholes, stung to madness by Marsden's unfeeling treatment, had gone full drive into the public-house to vent his indignation amongst customers of his own class—men from whom he found sympathy on other occasions. Besides, he, too, had a passing thought that from some source or another he might there find a clue to track his lost child.

He was talking vehemently in front of the bar to a couple of men and to Rosa when Daniel Dent entered, and approaching the bar at his back, quietly asked for a glass of ale, which he took as he stood, not at a draught, but at intervals.

There was that in Scholes's unstudied speech which would have arrested the veriest stranger. No wonder, then, that Mr. Dent allowed himself to be attracted, and finally to join in the conversation, expressing just such commiseration as anyone with a heart would in such a case.

"How old is the daughter you are in search of, my friend?" he asked.

"Hardly sixteen, sir—hardly sixteen! Quoite a choilt, though hoo looks much owder, an' as pratty a lass as any i' Tyl'sley Bongs."

"Had she a sweetheart anywhere?"

"Not as aw knows on. Aw nivvor let th' lass run woild amang th' lads, an' hoo's allays seemed good as goold, only happen a bit too fond o' foinery."

"Then you do not think she has eloped with anyone, or been enticed away?" interrogated Daniel, mildly.

"Aw conno' tell. Aw'm fair mazed an' daundered. Aw moight ha thowt hoo'd mebbe gone off fur a day's pleassurin', but"—and he drew a small bit of something in paper from his waistcoat pocket—"hoo'd left this'n stickin' t' th' bed quilt, an' aw'm feart t' think heaw hoo cam' by it."

It was one of Nelly's earrings—the tempter's brilliant gift.

Mr. Dent examined it. It was not first-class jewellery, but still beyond Nelly's humble means. He shook his head.

"I fear *that* is conclusive. That earring was never bought in either Tyldesley or Leigh—and it may be yet the means of tracing her."

He signed to the man to come out of earshot. "Is there no one—no gentleman—you could suspect of beguiling her?"

"Noan! If Tum Marsden had bin a loikely chap aw met ha suspected *him*—he's bad enoof fur eawt, but a sickly ill-favoured chap loike *that* ar Nelly'd ha' toorned oop her nose at. An' Tum Marsden's noan gone t' Southport this summer oather."

"Oh, Mr. Tom Marsden! You surely would not think of *him?*" in a tone which implied that Mr. Tom Marsden was above suspicion. "He would be an infamous wretch if he could plan the ruin of a simple girl, whilst his own father lay between life and death. Oh, that is preposterous!"

Whatever Mr. Dent's private opinion might be, it was no

part of his policy to set Scholes upon *that* scent. Quiet and subdued as the man had been in answering his queries, his previous threats against the unknown villain who had destroyed his home (which, uttered to his own associates, Mr. Dent had overheard) were those of an infuriated savage, and Simeon Marsden had not gone scot-free.

It suited the cautious clerk, therefore, to carry the man's mind into speculative regions afar, and, strangely enough, he hit on that which was nearer the mark than he himself dreamed.

"Do you know whether any gentleman unknown to the neighbourhood has been seen hovering about after nightfall, or coming and going in the daytime—anyone likely to attract a foolish girl?"

The man shook his head. He had heard of no one.

"Then if I were you, Scholes, I would inquire. Ask the police and such people as keep late hours themselves. And you can ask—but I think this is needless—if any stranger and the girl have been seen together on the roads or in the fields. And here—such inquiry costs money, even for glasses of ale. I am but a poor clerk with a small salary, or I would give you more, for I am truly sorry for you." He offered Scholes two half-crowns.

The man hesitated and hung back. He had not asked for money, and was proud in his way. Many a man who, like Scholes, would grumble if his master refused a shilling for drink, would refuse five offered as a dole.

"Nay, take it, man," said Dent. "You were not too proud to ask help from Mr. Marsden; and if you are out of work you will need all the help you can get before you find either your Nelly or her seducer."

Scholes reluctantly took the money, saying as he did so—

"Foind tham, mester! Gin they'n crept into a rat-hole, aw'll ferret em eawt. An' aw'll sell iv'ry stick an' stone afore aw give oop—an' then aw wunnot!"

They had been walking on together towards Leigh, and had neared the extremity of Squire's-lane.

Mr. Dent held out his hand and gave Scholes a strong, sympathetic grasp, as a sort of token that he wished to proceed alone, saying, as he dropped the other's hand—

"You know where I am to be found. You can let me know the result of your further inquiries; perhaps I might throw out hints useful to you."

Scholes made a rough bow.

"And should you succeed sooner than you expect, or find

things not so black as they look, I may be able to assist you to fresh employment. But be careful of that earring."

They went their several ways—Scholes to his search, impressed with the affability and interest of Caleb Booth's clerk ; the clerk to the bleach-works, calculating how best to use Scholes for his own purposes, and what sort of a tool he would make.

CHAPTER XVII.

OLD HEADS ON YOUNG SHOULDERS.

THE excitement consequent on the interview with Scholes drove Mr. Marsden back to his sofa for a day or two, and further postponed Tom's holiday, to the discomfort of the females of the family, father and son being about as amiable as two bears.

The latter was particularly restless, alike at the mill and at home, and once or twice he made errands to Leigh on pretences so frivolous that old Minshull, not by any means suspicious, found himself wondering "What the dickens is young master off to Leigh for now? He can't be after that Miss Booth! Fred's shoes would never fit him. But I'm sure there's no *business* to take him off there *this* day."

If Minshull had followed him, he would have found that his journey ended at the post-office—a shoe shop in Market-street—and that his business was the postage of a letter to Bolton.

The second time he did extend his walk through King-street to the canal bank, and so on to the bleach-works by the Metal Bridge. Wherefore he could hardly have told. Some latent idea there was in his mind that something might transpire respecting his brother Fred.

Ostensibly, his visit was to make courteous inquiries respecting Mrs. Booth's health—a pretence too shallow to blind even Mr. Booth.

He was heartily sorry he had stepped so far out of his way before he got back to Tyldesley Banks.

Almost at the entrance of the bleachcroft he met Mr. Booth and his clerk together, the latter with a book in his hand, in which he had been checking off parcels of finished goods, loading for delivery.

And almost the first thing which greeted him was good Mr. Booth's remark—

"Sad thing this about poor Scholes's daughter. I hear the old man is almost distracted. Do you know if he has obtained any tidings of her?"

Tom had a front of brass, but was hardly prepared for this abrupt question. Somehow he was less at ease in the presence of Dent than of Dent's master.

He gave his knuckles a preliminary crack or two before he drawled out from between his hutched-up shoulders—

"I know nothing about either the man or his daughter. I never meddle with matters that don't concern me."

"Not concern you!" echoed Mr. Booth, in blank surprise—"and the girl one of your own reelers!"

"And a pretty girl to boot, if I may be allowed the remark," appended Mr. Dent, deferentially.

"So I hear," drawled out Tom. "But really where so many women come and go daily, one never notices whether they are pretty or ugly. It matters more to us the sort of work they turn out."

"I thought the machines did that, Mr. Thomas," again suggested the clerk. (He would not have taken such a liberty two months before.)

"Perhaps Mr. Thomas sees no difference between the human machine and the machine of wood and iron!" struck in Mr. Booth, his feelings getting the upper hand.

But Tom was wilfully impervious.

"Well, from a business point of view, not much. It wouldn't pay."

They had sauntered on towards the house. Mr. Dent, with a bow, went back to his desk, and the others through the side gate to the back entrance.

It was one of the mornings Mr. Hay devoted to William. He was just quitting the laboratory.

Tom had here to undergo a second catechism; and again another from Caroline and William, the news having travelled fast.

He was more on his guard now, but still preserved his aspect of indifference, all the better that the clerk was away; and, moreover, he made an effort to ingratiate himself into Caroline's favour by a clumsy inference that the brilliance of her charms blinded him to inferior beauty.

A compliment awkwardly framed, but nevertheless duly reported by Miss Dent to her brother.

Again Tom's armoury was put to the proof that day.

Hastening homeward through Atherton Park in a state of waspish irritation, tempered somewhat by self-gratulation on his own power of self-concealment, just as he reached the gate by the Old Hall he came face to face with Scholes himself.

His equanimity sustained a shock.

Hardened as was his nature, little as he cared for the father's feelings, he was a craven at heart, and he knew enough of this

man to dread the revelation to whom his daughter's flight was owing.

"Eh, Mester Tummus, awm fain to fa in wi' yo'!" (Thomas did not reciprocate the pleasure.) "Aw've yeard summat o' my lass." (Not a pleasant announcement that.) "It's not mitch" (that was better); "but still it's summat. Happen yo con help me." (Could and would are of the same mood and tense, but were not alike in Tom Marsden's mood.)

"Well, happen I might," fell slowly from lips stretched into an evil hypocritical smile, as, closing one hand over the other, he cracked his resonant knuckles one by one.

"Weel, dun yo' happen to know among any o' the gentry abeawt if ony o' them have a foine felly vistin' them, or han yo a custimer wi' dark mustachus, an' a bob o' hair on's chin, a regular out-an-out swell—a chap wi' a shoinin' ring, an' a big reawnd shoinin' breast-pin, wi' a handsome dark blue coat an' velvet collar?"

It was coming pretty close, but still impervious Tom kept his balance.

"What sort of a man?" he asked.

"Whoy, aw wur towlt a chap much abeawt yo'r hoighth—yoi, they said as Tum Marsden—only a little bit hoigher an' straighter i' the shoulders" (Scholes was not very complimentary), "wur met more nor wunce on th' road atween Cinder Hill an' th' Sand Pits wi a lass mufflet up in a shawl, much abeawt ar Nellie's hoighth. But aw connut hear owt abeawt him; though he wur wunce seen to come eawt o' th' Flamin' Castle late at neet. But Rosa says hoo knows nowt abeawt him!"

Tom's temperament had alternated during this speech. He rubbed his hands and cracked them alternately.

"Many of our customers wear rings and breast-pins, but a—a—I don't remember a dark moustache—you said it was *dark*."

"Yoi!"

"I'm afraid I cannot help you, my good man. I know one gentleman with *light* moustache, but tradesmen, as a rule, shave clean. And Rosa Bradshaw pretty generally knows her customers."

"Ay, Mester Tummas, but Rosa may know moore nor hoo loikes to tell. But aw'll foind him oot fur o' that, hoigh or low, rich or poor, far or near—aw'll ferret un eawt; an' then"—the man clenched his fist and looked up—"an' then, may God ha' mercy on his guilty soul!"

A sort of creepy sensation stole over Tom's frame, but still he maintained a bold front.

"Well, Scholes, were I you I would look for the girl first; and were I you, instead of threatening shadows, I would keep my breath to cool my porridge. Good day!"

"And were aw yo', yo' cowd-blooded sarpint, aw'd be asheamed t' mak geame o' an honest man's trouble. It's just sich another as yo', but better favvoured, as has bin th' ruin o' Nelly an' me, body an' soul!"

And Scholes, rough, hard, uncultivated man that he was, leaned his head on his arm on the gate and wept—for his daughter—and himself—ay, and for Tom Marsden.

About a week later Sophia Marsden stepped gaily into the back parlour at The Willows.

Caroline and Miss Dent were both upstairs with Mrs. Booth, who had never left her room since her last attack.

William was in the laboratory with the Rev. John. Odd, rather, that Miss Sophia's visits should chance to fall on a tutorial day.

Mr. Booth was seated at a table drawn close to the bay window, arranging dead butterflies in a case.

So intent was he on his work, that he did not note the entrance of his visitor until she approached and spoke to him.

"My dear Miss Marsden, how do you do? I really did not see you until you spoke, I was so much interested in my work; and young ladies are as light and noiseless as one of these *Papilionidæ*"—pointing to his butterflies.

"I hope we are not quite such useless flutterers, Mr. Booth; and I assure you I am anything but noiseless as a rule. I think your simile falls to the ground. Caroline is rather quiet, to be sure, but she is by no means a gay and idle flutterer."

"What think you of Miss Dent?" asked he, a sort of admiration in his tone.

"Oh, Miss Dent! She never occurred to me," said Sophy, with a slight disparaging shrug, "though she is silence itself; but I should say there was more of the caterpillar about Miss Dent than the sportive butterfly."

Mr. Booth looked a trifle "put out."

"How do you manage to find time for insect collecting now? Have you a new manager?"

Caleb Booth was running an insect pin through a speckled wood butterfly as she spoke. Raising his head, he said—

"No, I have not much time now, or these would not have lain unsorted so long. But Mr. Dent is so active and so intelligent, I find I can steal an hour from business now and then for my

favourite pursuit, without anything going wrong. And I have engaged a junior clerk to relieve him of the drudgery."

"Mr. Dent is a fortunate man—he seems to be in high favour," remarked Sophia, casually; adding, as if to change the subject, whilst she watched the amateur naturalist, "What is that pretty brown butterfly called—the one with the red-rimmed black spots you are impaling now?"

"Oh, that is *Erebia blandina*, the Scotch Argus butterfly, quite a rarity, I assure you. This has been sent to me from Grange—it frequents that locality. I exchanged a *Papilio machaon*—a swallow-tailed butterfly—like this, for it. But you said Mr. Dent was a fortunate man, my dear. It is I who am the fortunate man to possess such a treasure of a clerk. Poor Ralph's death and my dear wife's illness so upset me, the business must have gone to the dogs but for him. It seems his father was a druggist, or a drysalter, or something of that sort, and he has some chemical knowledge. And would you think—solely to be more useful to me—he has offered to go through a course of chemical study if Mr. Hay and William would not object to his joining them."

"Indeed!" said Sophy, drily. "How very disinterested!"

"Very," echoed Mr. Booth, too much occupied with his butterflies to notice her look or tone; "and I don't think it was altogether civil of Hay to object."

"Did Mr. Hay object?" asked Sophia, offering her finger for the canary to peck at.

"Yes; he said the laboratory was too small for three."

Here Miss Dent opened the door without a sound.

"Will Miss Marsden please to step upstairs?"

Though the day was far from cold, there was a bright fire burning in the bedroom grate, and Mrs. Booth sat in a soft holland-covered easy-chair, beyond the glare, but yet within the glow, wrapped in a thick shawl-patterned dressing-gown.

The room was faultlessly neat—not a medicine bottle was to be seen, no closet door gaped. The hearth (freshly marbled with pipeclay on a blue ground) was free from cinders; a calimanco cat, with a pair of kittens, lay coiled upon the rug; the high brass fender and fireirons did credit to Becka, the polisher. Not a crease was in the coverlet—not a fold awry in the muslin drapery of the toilet table. A vase of gorgeous dahlias stood on the high mahogany drawers—a smaller vase, containing Michaelmas daisies and bright chrysanthemums, adorned a small stand within reach of the invalid, whereon also lay a small glass dish of blanc-mange and another of fruit, together with a book and

Mrs. Booth's pocket-handkerchief, white as the drifted snow. Everything was neat, even to primness. It was scarcely possible to couple the room with illness.

Mrs. Booth, who appeared better and stronger than when Sophia had seen her last, observing that her visitor's eye took in all this, after the first interchange of greetings, broke out into praises of Miss Dent, quite as lavish as those bestowed by her spouse on the brother.

"She is neatness personified, my dear Sophia. The room is always in the same order—no litter, no dust; and she arranges everything so quietly and composedly, one seems to forget she is working. Her touch is like magic, and her attention to a fussy invalid like me is something marvellous."

"I should have thought Caroline would have been your best nurse," suggested Sophia, not too well pleased to see her friend ignored, where she had been so devoted.

"Ah, yes, my dear—Caroline is all very well; but you cannot put old heads on young shoulders, and she lacks Miss Dent's forethought and experience. The folding-screen" (there was one near the door) "was Miss Dent's suggestion, to keep off the draught." (It might answer other purposes, not suspected by simple Mrs. Booth.) "This blanc-mange was made by her. Taste it, my dear;" and Sophy having pronounced it excellent, the good lady went on with her catalogue of Miss Dent's many virtues, that admirable young lady being behind the screen at the time.

Yet when Caroline, who had been dressing, entered the room, she glided from it as naturally as if she had been on her way out when Miss Booth opened the door.

"My dear Caroline," exclaimed Sophia, warmly, "how very weary and worn you do look!"

"I *am* rather tired, Sophia," she acquiesced.

"I think she is fretting after your brother," suggested Mrs. Booth. "As for being tired, I cannot see how that should be. Miss Dent takes all the trouble off her hands."

All that came under Mr. or Mrs. Booth's observation she did; but Miss Dent had the not uncommon faculty of absorbing the merit of other people's works, and Caroline was too depressed to make any protest.

"She is not the only one who frets after Fred—I do my share; but I take care not to gratify Master Tom by showing it," cried Sophy. "I suppose you have not had any more letters?"

'Only one," answered Caroline, with a sigh, "when the *Laura* put into Cork harbour. Just a few lines to say how sea-

sick he had been, and how unable to write more. He said the captain was kind to him, and the black cook had taken a fancy to him; but there was a scapegrace of an apprentice who tormented his life out. He cut the strings of his hammock, and let him slide out; put pepper in his coffee, and salt water in his grog. Before Fred had been on board ten minutes he took his knife and refused to return it; but your brother knocked him head over heels across a cable, and he was forced to surrender the knife, and after that was quiet for a while. It was that knock-down blow which made a friend of the cook, who hates the other—he is such a swaggerer. Fred says he's a gentleman's son, with whom a large premium was paid, and he gives himself airs on that account."

"Ah, my love, trust Fred to turn his airs to another tune before the voyage is over. And now guess what brings me here to-day?"

Caroline whispered in her ear, and Sophy crimsoned.

"Nothing of the kind, Miss Sharp," said she, laughing. "No, the Ogre has gone—vanished—disappeared. The home of the Marsdens knows him not now. He mingles his whine with the waters on Southport sands, his tears with the salt spray, his sighs with the sea breeze; and peace reigns on his vacant throne;" and Sophy put herself into a dramatic attitude.

"And you have come to spread the delightful news?"

"I have come, O sapient Caroline, as an envoy from the major-domo and the minor-domo, to spirit you away from The Willows, which are so suggestive of weeping and melancholy that you must weep for companionship; needing your aid to sustain the loss of the grim Ogre; and we will in return help you to sustain the absence of the adorable prince."

"Ah, my dear, how sportive you are! I wish Caroline was half as lively," sighed Mrs. Booth.

"That would never do. I only shine by contrast," said Sophy, gaily, as Miss Dent, coming into the room, or from the back of the screen, said—

"It is time you took your medicine, Mrs. Booth;" and reaching bottle and glass from a corner cupboard measured a dose.

Sophy reverting to her wish to take Caroline back with her, some little discussion arose. Caroline was afraid she could not be spared, her mother appeared anxious that she should "go away for a little change," and Sophia was persistent in entreaty. In the midst of it Miss Dent put in her word. It was a habit of hers.

"If you would like to visit your friend, Miss Booth, and

would not mind entrusting your good mother to my care, I will do my very best to see that she does not miss you."

Caroline winced. She felt this had been done already.

"I do not doubt it; but there is William. His leg has to be dressed. And father would miss me at meal times."

"Indeed! Then you just wait till I come back;" and Sophia was off downstairs to repeat her invitation there, whilst Miss Dent, without seeming to thrust her services forward, offered to attend to the knee, to preside at breakfast and tea, and all as if with the sole desire of giving Miss Booth a chance of a change and a holiday.

Sophia came back triumphant. William and Mr. Booth had been delightfully gracious; but Caroline, not prepared to go on the instant, and most unaccountably reluctant (for her mother was mending rapidly, and Miss Dent was a capital nurse and housekeeper), could only be induced to agree to a compromise.

Miss Sophia went back with the Rev. John Hay as an escort, in lieu of Caroline.

Mr. Booth drove his daughter over to Tyldesley on the following Monday, William, who had a desire to see Mrs. Marsden, being of the party.

It was a bright crisp day; one to set young blood dancing, and to chase away morbid depression; but somehow Caroline kept her companions and the horse waiting whilst she gave oft-repeated last orders to Jane and Becka, impressed Miss Dent with the importance of her charge, and returned to kiss and say good-bye to her mother, as if she were about to follow Fred to the antipodes, instead of going to his venerated mother's home, only three miles away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

COOKERY!

THE Ogre was gone.

That was a great subject for congratulation on the part of Sophia, until she learned from the Rev. John Hay that poor Nelly Scholes was missing; and had been last seen, or supposed to have been seen, in the company of a fashionably-attired man, wearing moustache and imperial both.

The gentle curate imagined her silence and evident emotion to be the result of womanly pity and regret for a deluded girl, and he loved her all the more for it.

But mingled with her pity and sorrowful sympathy came a sense of horror at her brother Tom's treachery and iniquity; for to her, if to no other, his disguise had been revealed by one of those small occurrences we are apt in our haste to call "accidents," or "chances."

The curate's tale of the father's distress and restless search for his lost child fell on her ear and on her heart with the force of a revelation. She could see the elopement in the light of her own knowledge, and the words of her companion struck her almost dumb.

The pitiful story had poisoned her walk home in spite of John Hay's presence and the softened glances which now and then encountered hers. Had she unwittingly been an abettor, in keeping silent so long? was the question in her heart.

She was glad to leave her companion with her mother, and fly to her own room to think. There she found Emma with her prim cottage bonnet and cape on, arranging a bundle of religious tracts for distribution.

"Oh, Emma!" she cried, full to overflowing with her burdensome secret, "Scholes's pretty daughter Nelly—the reeler—the girl who was in your Sunday-school class, has run off from her poor father, and, I fear, has been seduced by a villain."

Emma calmly proceeded with the enumeration of her tracts before she replied, with her ordinary imperturbability—

"So I heard the other day; but I don't think because a girl runs away from a miserable home she ought to be slandered. I never heed gossips. She may have got a servant's place, or gone to be married. I think people are making a fuss over

nothing;" and her tracts carefully tied, she left the room and the house on her way to distribute them.

"I wonder if anything short of an earthquake could ever stir the depths of our Emma's heart. Indeed, I marvel if she has one, she takes everything so coolly. There's not much fear of *her* ever running away, either to escape from a father or elope with a lover. She does not seem made of ordinary flesh and blood. It may be the placidity of the pious; but to me it looks more like frigidity or apathy," was Sophia's mental comment on her sister's treatment of Nelly Scholes's case.

And knowing what she did, she could not regard the matter lightly, as did Emma. Still the suggestion that the girl had gone off to be married had been charitably thrown out, and for the sake of both Nelly and her brother, she hoped such was the case.

"Better that he should marry the factory girl than dishonour her," she said to herself, as she returned to the parlour where she had left Mr. Hay in converse with her mother.

Again the inevitable subject cropped up.

"My dear, this is a very dreadful thing Mr. Hay has been telling me about poor Nelly Scholes. You will remember her—a pretty, bright-eyed girl, whom Emma used to teach."

"Oh, yes, I remember the poor thing well. I have seen her coming out of the mill over and over again," said Sophia, with a very heavy sigh.

"I am glad to find," observed the clergyman, bending his long back graciously as he spoke, "that neither you, Mrs. Marsden, nor my friend here, Miss Sophia, joins in the common outcry against this poor deluded child. Scholes himself came into notice so very recently, at the inquest on the unfortunate Mr. Hyde, that the disappearance of his daughter has set the tongue of gossip on the wag, and I am sorry to say feminine charity has kept in the background. 'Forward minx!' 'Depraved hussy!' are the common epithets flung after her, deserved or undeserved;" and his cheek kindled as he contrasted the forbearance of the two ladies before him with those others to whom he referred.

"Is it not strange neither Tom nor your father said anything about this sad trouble of Scholes?" remarked Mrs. Marsden to Sophia, when the curate had taken leave.

Sophia confessed that it was; but she also reminded her mother that her father had been too much exasperated with the evidence of Scholes at the inquest to endure even the mention of the man's name. And there the subject dropped.

But it lay like a guilty secret on Sophia's kind heart for all that.

The absence of the Ogre made a pleasant change in the Marsden establishment; even Simeon himself condescended to be agreeable. Tom was just like cantharides to his father's excitable temperament, and the plaister removed, the sore healed.

Hence permission to receive a visitor, and that Miss Caroline Booth of all others—the young lady whose two thousand pounds appeared so very contemptible in Mr. Marsden's eyes.

Hence, too, the unwonted opening of his purse to make little preparations for her coming; and hence the welcome he accorded, cordially to her and William, to Mr. Booth a trifle stiffly.

William's crutch made an unwonted sound in that great house, echoing through hollow, half-furnished, uncarpeted rooms as he oscillated between parlour and kitchen, where he had a great friend in Ann. The woman had a young brother at home with just such another knee; and then, besides, he was a friend and a favourite of Master Fred's.

So whilst the elders were talking in the parlour of trade or politics, or religious controversy, and the young ladies endeavoured to draw music out of the old piano, William sat with Ann in the big kitchen, listening to anecdotes of her own brother and of the young master then tossing on the wide ocean.

So genial, indeed, was Mr. Marsden, that he planned an excursion to Bolton for his visitor and his daughters, offering to drive them over on Wednesday or Thursday.

He had, however, a shock before Thursday, which quite overturned his plans and his temper together.

Tuesday morning, of course, saw Bess, gig, and himself on their way to Manchester, and Tuesday night saw him return, bringing with him, amongst other comestibles for the refection of their guest, a fine Michaelmas goose for the morrow's dinner.

He also brought with him something else, of which he said nothing, but secreted with much caution after his family had retired to rest.

He had made many stoppages by the way home—the Three Horseshoes, Pendleton, and the Egerton Arms, Swinton, being only foremost in a series of resting-places, of which the Flaming Castle was the last—stoppages which left the quadruped the more intelligent and responsible animal. This was not a very common occurrence; it only marked out a lucky hit, a successful speculation.

He was left by the kitchen fire fast asleep, and crept to bed cold and shivering in the middle of the night, to disturb his wife

with his growling, and keep her awake with his hard breathing hours after he was asleep again.

As may be supposed, he rose late, dressed hurriedly, and almost scalded himself with his breakfast to get to the mill, there being no Tom to supply his place.

Mr. Marsden having a notion that broths and stews were the fittest dietary for invalids such as himself and son, the chief of their cookery was done in the pot or pan. A roast joint was a rare exception—that which they called roasting being, in fact, *baking*, and done in the oven.

This oven was of the old-fashioned kind, common enough in the north, but rarely seen in modern London. It had its separate flue, and was heated by glowing coals raked under it from the fire itself. There was an iron slide to be drawn from the flue to increase the draught for heating purposes, and shut across when the oven was not in use. A similar trap below the oven kept the fire together, or being withdrawn, released fire and ashes, which fell through to the hearth. But above the oven was an enclosed space some three inches deep over its entire surface, to draw the hot air to the top. At the front was a small slip of iron (called a damper) sliding downwards in grooves, by means of which the cook could regulate the heat. Through this aperture it was necessary from time to time to remove the soot which clogged the hot-air chamber, with an implement known as a cow-rake (coal-rake).

Such is a fair description of an ordinary Lancashire oven thirty years back, which for economy, service, and practical utility, beat all the gimcrack stoves and kitcheners that ever were invented.

Marsden's oven was seldom used except on Sundays or baking days (Fridays); but a goose was one of those articles consigned to the oven, and it being Emma's week to assist Ann in the kitchen (the young ladies did it by turns), she undertook to have the oven properly heated for the occasion, whilst the other stuffed and trussed the bird.

It might have been supposed Emma would have chosen the latter department, but she hated cookery, having an aversion (not uncommon) to touch anything soft and oleaginous, or wet and pulpy.

As she raked the soot from the oven top, she uttered a short, sharp cry.

"What's th' matter?" cried Ann, turning half round.

Emma, with her back towards her, was shaking a finger in the air.

"What, brunt th' fingers? Yo' should 'a been more careful;" and the maid turned to her dresser, skewer in hand, while Emma put down the damper and went to her own room, as she said, for a bit of old linen in which to wrap her scorched finger.

She was away some time. When she returned her finger was swathed in a white cloth.

She put a fresh stock of fire under the oven, and for some reason or other was readjusting the damper, when Ann, advancing with the goose on a tin dripper, called out sharply—

"Dunno thee lift th' damper agen; th' oven's noan too hot neaw."

"I was not raising it, Ann—I was only putting it down. It was not fitting closely," she explained, as Ann shut the oven door on the goose.

When the family invades the servants' territory to live therein, the servant is raised pretty much to the level of the family, and, being brought into close communion, is apt to forget that there is such a thing as difference in their social status.

Thus it was with Ann. She was thoroughly well-meaning, adored her mistress, admired Miss Sophia, loved the runaway Fred, and was well disposed towards Emma; but she had been long one of the household, and made as free as faithful old servants so situated generally do.

So, having her bird in its last warm nest, she turned on Emma.

"Let's see thi finger. Hast hurt it much?"

"Oh, nothing to speak of," said Emma, moving away, but not uncovering the affected digit.

"Well, thah sheawted loud enoof. If aw'd bin yo aw'd ne'er ha' meead sich a fuss abeawt nowt;" and the strong-minded domestic, who frequently burned her own arms and fingers without any demonstration, proceeded to pare apples for sauce with a curl of contempt, for "a lass so nesh hoo must coddle oop a brunt finger."

Sophia and Caroline had spent the day out of doors. The former had posted a tolerably peremptory letter to Southport, requesting to see Tom immediately on a matter of importance.

Dinner-time brought them home; and closely in their wake came Mr. Marsden. He sniffed the savoury odour of Rome's sacred bird, rubbed his large red hands together in satisfaction, chucked Caroline under the chin, and standing up to carve, pronounced a shorter grace than usual.

Not even to do honour to a guest could Simeon Marsden dine elsewhere than in the kitchen; and his ordinary seat was

at the end nearest to the fire, which was consequently behind him.

He had carved the goose dexterously, as men of his day could and did; had helped all round plentifully, reserving a few choice tid-bits for his own eating; and despatched his first plateful with much gusto.

It was a fad of his to have a second hot plate for any hot joint. As Ann reached this second plate from the oven, she closed the door with a clash.

Down dropped Mr. Marsden's knife and fork. He turned pale. He stammered out—

"How was this goose cooked?"

The alarm in his face had communicated itself to those at the table. No one seemed capable of a reply.

Sturdy Ann was the first to answer.

"Whoy, heaw should'n it be cooked? I' th' o'en, to be sure!"

With a yell of a tiger, infuriated by the toothache, he rushed to the oven, overturning his chair against the fender, and upsetting the brass footman, on which a damson tart was being kept warm.

In the midst of the clatter and crash he lifted the hot damper, and heeding not his own burnt fingers, put his hand within the orifice, and bringing thence a few particles of light filmy tinder, the veriest gossamer of burnt paper, danced about the kitchen and tore his hair in a state of idiotic fury.

The ladies rose, pale, trembling, and curious. But no one dared venture a question.

It was some minutes before Mrs. Marsden could muster courage to ask, timidly,

"What is wrong, Mr. Marsden?"

"Wrong, wrong!" he spluttered. "Why, that d— goose has destroyed five hundred pounds, good Bank of England notes!"

Mrs. Marsden looked dazed; and he still stamped about the floor, banging things over that stood in his way.

"The goose destroy them! I do not understand," she faltered.

"Who expects a fool like thee to understand anything! Had you no eyes? Could you not see?" he roared out at the pitch of his loud voice. "I tell thee they're burnt—burnt to tinder!" he shrieked; "and I'll never see a penny of them again!"

With the last word he sank down in a chair, groaning and wringing his hands as if his whole fortune was gone.

"Heaw cam' th' bank notes to be i' th' kitchen o'en?"

demanded rather than inquired Ann, evidently aggrieved by the distance of her uneaten dinner, and the commotion in her domain.

"Oh!" he said, swaying backwards and forwards in mental pain, too cowed to resent her rough interference, "I put them there for safety last night when I came home."

"Safety, indeed!" jerked out Ann. "A noice place t' put bank noates! It just sarves yo' reet! Happen yo'd forgotten 'em a day or two lunger, when th' o'en hed bin raked eawt, an' th' tinder blown a' away. An' what then? Whoy, yo' moight ha' said'n (it's loike enoof) as aw'd stolen th' papper money! An' be hanged to yo'r moiserly ways, says oi!" and Ann flounced about, as indignant at the "might have been!" as Mr. Marsden was enraged at his loss.

Mrs. Marsden had attempted to check her, but it was no use; and Mr. Marsden, who had resented testily all inquiry or solace from his wife, sat still under the indignant woman's rebuke without a word of protest.

"Sarves um reet—aw'm glad on it!" she ejaculated, over and over again, as she moved about, putting the disordered place to rights in her very restlessness.

Sophia's fright had changed into an irresistible sense of the ludicrous, and she had held a handkerchief well over her mouth to keep in her mirth.

Her father had a habit of hiding money in unaccountable places, and accusing one or other of theft, until, his memory coming back, he found his hoards where he had himself secreted them.

She thought he had bought a good lesson with his five hundred pounds.

Emma looked placidly from one to the other, then rose, asked if anyone would have any more dinner, and being answered in the negative, calmly told Ann to get hers, and began herself to clear the table.

Caroline, unused to such scenes, knew not what to think or say; but she felt what her dear, distant Fred must have endured daily.

At length she spoke to this effect: "If you have the numbers of the notes, Mr. Marsden, I should think you could recover from the bank."

He gnashed his teeth and stamped his feet. "Ha! that's it," he cried, miserably—"that's the worst. I've *not* got the numbers—I've not got the numbers!"

Emma, who was carrying a heap of plates to the kitchen, had

stopped in the doorway to hear his reply. She then went on, and did not return.

Whether she had burnt her fingers or not, Simeon Marsden had burnt *his*, both literally and figuratively.

CHAPTER XIX.

FROM SOUTHPORT.

TUESDAY had been Michaelmas Day, and for once Mr. Marsden had paid his quarterly doctor's bill without a murmur. But the reduction of his bank notes to ashes—the loss of five hundred pounds gained by smartness on 'Change, in less than twenty-four hours, through his own stupidity—was more than he could bear. The loss was gauged by his cupidity, not by his means.

And now ensued a strife between the natural savagery and moroseness of the man and his desire to maintain before Caroline the character for practical piety and hospitality which he vainly supposed clothed him as a garment.

He would talk of his loss to Caroline Booth in the parlour with the pious resignation of a martyr, and deprecate the intemperate display she had witnessed, much as St. Paul lamented the thorn in his flesh. But she could overhear him in kitchen or chamber give vent to his repressed passion, notwithstanding the thick walls and doors of which he had boasted.

From William she received a daily bulletin which set her at ease respecting her mother's health. Miss Dent dressed his knee to perfection, and all went well at The Willows.

The weather was autumn's very best. She and Sophia spent much of their time out of doors, now and again dropping in at Eckersley Fold to see their mutual friends.

And for conversation, had they not the absent Fred and the nearer Rev. John?

Caroline brightened in a very few days; but over the lively and buoyant Sophia came a sober change. She grew grave, and subject to fits of musing, from which she would start with an inefficient attempt to be her old self.

As girls will, Caroline rallied her on her dejection, bidding her "make hay while the sun shone," and so forth.

But Caroline was wrong in her surmises.

Sophia's melancholy arose, not from the ripening love in her heart—too pure to show itself unsought—but from her dread lest a simple girl should have succumbed to her own brother's wicked arts.

Her letter to him remained unanswered; and from that she augured the worst. Again she wrote, and her letter took the form of a threat.

This time her brother found it convenient to obey, and when Caroline had been there a week, Tom Marsden walked into the house, with no other excuse than that, having heard of the burnt bank notes, he was afraid the loss might have made his father ill again, and was anxious on his account.

Caroline and Sophia were out when he put his evil face in at the kitchen door, and took his old seat in the chimney corner, to Ann's intense disgust. When they returned from their morning walk, the glow of youth and health on both their handsome faces, Tom was taken by surprise.

He had not calculated upon seeing Miss Booth under his father's roof.

His reception by Sophia was somewhat different from her wont.

Her habit had been to greet him on his return home by seizing his hands in both hers, dragging him perforce from his seat, and, in spite of his wheezy protestations, whirl him round and round the great kitchen in a sort of extemporised waltz, until, herself fatigued, she allowed him to drop into his seat, and pant and puff as if utterly exhausted by her unfeeling treatment.

But he never appeared much the worse for his impromptu tarantella; only there was, for some time after, the sort of look on his face a boy might wear who had been brought by the ear from revelling among jampots on the sly.

It was Sophia's own irresistibly droll and humorous way of declaring that she knew him to be a humbug, and his debility a sham.

He was quite prepared to dance without invitation that morning, but he was not prepared for her quiet and expressive "Good morning, sir—I hope I see you better."

Miss Booth and his mother were both in the kitchen; he was bound to sustain his part. He whined forth, plaintively—

"Thank you, Sophy. I think I do feel a little stronger, but the journey has shaken me sadly."

Then, turning towards Caroline, he said, in like tones, with what was meant to be a seductive smile, but which was more like a repulsive leer, and with much want of tact—

"How very charming you look in your mourning, Miss Booth. The black sets off the white transparency of your skin to perfection. You should never wear anything else."

Caroline coloured as if resenting his impertinence.

"I would rather wear anything else, sir, without respect to appearance. I never look in a glass, or on my drapery, without

remembering the loss it typifies;" and she went away, her eyes suffused with tears.

"Have you come back for good, Tom?" was his mother's interrogatory.

"Good!" echoed Sophia, with unwonted seriousness. "I hope he has. I don't think he went away for much good"—the covert innuendo being intelligible alone to him.

"Well, I am afraid not," assented Mrs. Marsden. "It was very late in the season for the seaside. Was Southport pretty full, Tom? I suppose you are not going back?"

"Oh, yes, mother, I am," he whined, with the usual musical accompaniment. "I have not had half my course of warm baths. I did think of returning to-morrow; but I feel so shaken, I must stay a day or so to rest."

More likely the unexpected presence of a feminine visitor had something to do with his change of mind.

Sophia looked up searchingly in his face, whilst Emma smoothed the creases out of the dinner-cloth she was laying.

"Would he talk of staying or going so indifferently if he were newly-married, or if he had even left Nelly, a new toy, behind him?" was her thought.

She settled the question at midnight, her customary hour for coming to an understanding with Tom. At least, he settled it.

But ere that Tom Marsden had the afternoon before him, and not knowing how far the secret of his iniquity was safe, he kept away from the mill, and to amuse himself attempted to carry on a flirtation with Caroline.

Perhaps he had some ulterior intentions, based on the *honourable* promptings of his cold-blooded heart. It would be such a grand and triumphant stroke if he could rival his brother Fred successfully.

So all that afternoon he attached himself to the young ladies, and did his best to make himself agreeable, spoiling all, however, by ogling and complimenting their visitor, whom he so disconcerted that she made mistakes in the couvrette she was crocheting, and had to unravel several rows.

Then he brought from his carpet bag a long tongue of sea-weed, to hang up in his own room as a barometer—the large mercurial one in the hall not being sufficient for his needs; and after that had been passed round as a remarkable specimen, some half-dozen sea-shells purchased on the beach—shells anything but indigenous to Southport—were produced.

He selected the finest pair as a propitiatory offering to Caroline, who would fain have declined them; but he remarked

drily that he had imagined anything which came from the sea would be welcome; and, mistaking his sneer for kindly feeling, she thanked him for the shells—whose lustrous sheen they all admired—and then quietly set them aside.

But if he thought to buy Caroline's closer friendship, or warp her young affection, by gifts and flattery, he made a miscalculation. She accepted his present, considering it too trivial to decline, without attaching undue importance to the gift—or giver.

Of course he had a *tête-à-tête* with his father over the kitchen fire, and poured from his congenial breast a flood of sympathy for the terrible loss, asking as many minute questions respecting the disaster as though he had a pecuniary interest (well, perhaps he had), and could replace the burned notes by condolence and lamentation.

His sister's midnight visit was anticipated. He had neither gone to bed nor undressed.

Could that dignified woman, in shawl and dressing-gown, be the same Sophia who kept her mother's sinking heart up with her sportive sallies?

Like Portia, she came to see justice done; and her robe and demeanour became her as well as the disguise of Shylock's "most excellent young judge."

"Tom, where is Nelly Scholes?" was her initiatory question, as she stood with her hands resting on the table before him. "Where is Nelly Scholes?" she repeated, with emphasis.

He had fenced with this query too often to be unprepared now.

"How the deuce should I know? What is Nelly Scholes to me?"

She changed her position, rested her arms on the table to bring her eyes on a level with his shifty words. The lamp was between them.

"That is precisely what I want to know," she said, slowly and deliberately. "What *is* Nelly Scholes to you?"

He endeavoured to look her boldly in the face, and evaded her question by another.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, *well*. Is Nelly Scholes your *wife* or—*mistress?*" It cost an effort to put the question, but duty overcame repugnance, and delicacy was lost on Tom.

"My *wife?*"

There was mingled surprise, contempt, and indignation in the exclamation, but she observed that he cracked his knuckles nervously for all that.

"Your mistress, then?"

"No, nor my mistress," he had the effrontery to say. Tom never stuck at a lie or equivoque when he knew his ground.

"Look you, Tom, evasion will not serve your turn with me. One or the other that poor girl must be; and if she is not your wife, you are an infamous scoundrel, and deserve whipping ignominiously through the town."

She drew her fine figure up to its full height, her cheeks crimsoned, and her bright eyes flashed in her righteous indignation. He cringed visibly, as cowards do before the strength of truth. Yet he piled falsehood upon falsehood.

"Perhaps I should, if all you insinuate so pleasantly were true," he sneered. "But your tongue wags a little too freely, sister Sophia."

"Do you mean to deny that you have deluded poor motherless Nelly Scholes—taken advantage of your position as her master to lead the child astray?"

"I do mean to deny it!"

"Then you are a greater scoundrel still; and I scorn to call you brother."

"Perhaps, after that theatrical rant, you will descend to my level, and tell me in plain English why you suspect *me?*" And he looked at her across the table as composedly virtuous as any actor in a mimic scene.

"Because Nelly Scholes was met on the high road after midnight with a well-dressed man *about your height* with a *dark moustache* and *imperial*. And I *rather* think that is the disguise of the man who sneaks in and out of our landing window when he thinks honest folk abed!"

"If I chose to dress like a gentleman at the only time I can, that is my business," said he, decidedly; "and if I happen to fall in with a woman on the road, it does not follow she should be Nelly Scholes. Did your informant see her face?"

He put the question with a sharp inquisitive glance, and none of his habitual drawl.

Sophia hesitated. She was not sure.

He saw his advantage, and pressed it.

"You had better ask that question and ascertain the point before you assail me again, sister Sophy. You have made pretty free since you first caught me coming home by a road of my own. But if you have one secret of mine, I have two of yours. Suppose I turned tattler and let out that you found the money, and helped that sly Fred off? What then? And suppose I hinted that you and a beggarly curate had fallen head and heels in love with each other! What *then?*"

He saw her flush, and pale, and flush again, and hissed with spiteful malignity—"Ah, I have you there, young lady! Don't you play the spy, and make false accusations against me again, or I'll bring such a house about your ears, you'll be glad to escape from it yourself."

She had been daunted for a moment only. Now she answered, bravely—

"Whatsoever I have done for Fred has been in the way of *duty*. Your insinuation respecting Mr. Hay I repel. No word of love has passed between us, and no fear of the consequences to myself shall prevent my warning you against the consequences of your sin; for I see it written in your face. Deny what you will, I know that Nelly Scholes is in your toils; and I warn you that unless you marry the girl, if Scholes traces her flight to you your very life may pay the penalty. Our father was furious at the loss of a few bank notes. Think what the just wrath of Scholes must be, robbed of his daughter!"

She left him to think. But her own thoughts drove sleep from her pillow until long after Minshull had been for the keys.

Tom looked at her defiantly across the breakfast-table the next morning, without a spoken word; and continued his oppressive attention to Caroline.

About ten o'clock he dragged himself across to the mill in the wake of his father; looked about him a little; asked Minshull casually if that fellow Scholes had heard anything of his daughter yet; and, barely waiting for an answer, turned to another idle topic, and then sauntered home again.

Sophia was busied with some domestic matter, Emma making a potato pie, and Caroline sat alone in the parlour, her hands straying listlessly across the keys, whilst her imagination flew across the ocean to the wanderer born beneath that roof.

Tom stole in softly, closed the door against intrusion, and, coming behind her, laid his hand lightly but familiarly on her shoulder.

She rose, shook off his hand, and moved in offended silence to the sofa.

But Tom was not one to be silently rebuffed.

He followed, seated himself beside her, and addressing her as "My dear Caroline," put his long arm round her waist, and attempted to draw her towards him with a leer so loathsome and offensive that she thrust him from her with horror.

But he held her fast in his grasp, and when she cried out for "Sophia!" only laughed at her.

She burst from him and rushed to the door, but he pursued

and drew her back, and, laughing his hideous laugh, told her she would not have run away had his name been Fred.

At last she made her escape, and in indignation sought Sophia, who with difficulty prevented her hastening back to The Willows on the instant. She, however, kept carefully aloof from her insolent wooer, and remained persistently silent when he spoke to her; at which he only chuckled.

The following morning saw his second departure to his favourite Southport, where he seldom felt constrained to enact the invalid, and where, in a cottage on the North Meols Road, Nelly, filled with vague apprehensions, awaited his return.

His absence was a relief to both Sophia and Caroline, the term of whose stay was drawing to a close.

They had, however, arranged a visit or two in the interim to Sophia's especial friends.

None of the visits were destined to be paid. Their simple toilettes had been made for a friendly tea at Miss Eckersley's, and they stood at the hall door saying "Good afternoon" to Mrs. Marsden, when a phaeton drove rapidly to the gate.

It had brought Mr. Daniel Dent, apparently in much agitation.

Miss Booth was required at home immediately. Her mother was suffering under a fresh and severe attack.

The phaeton took back Caroline Booth, still more truly agitated; and, during the short drive, Mr. Dent, with much real respect and genuine feeling, strove to allay her unquiet.

Before they reached The Willows, Mrs. Booth had ceased to exist.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CERTIFICATE.

Miss Dent's sympathy with the bereaved family was most delicate and unobtrusive. She excused her own expression of sorrow on the ground of Mrs. Booth's well-known partiality for herself, and lamented that in the deceased lady she had lost a kind friend—a fact so indisputable that widower, son, and daughter alike felt called upon to express their own friendly feeling, as a mark of respect to the sentiments of the dead.

Even at the moment of Mrs. Booth's dissolution, Miss Dent had been occupied in preparing a warm bath for the patient, under Mr. Ashcroft's instructions, and that gentleman observed to Caroline that no one could possibly have been more assiduous than Miss Dent.

Yet, as he went home, the surgeon pondered in great dubiosity two or three questions, in which his own medical reputation was involved, and also Miss Dent's claim as a model nurse.

If the shock of her brother's death had, in the first instance, caused concussion of the brain—and Dr. Harrison had confirmed his opinion and treatment—all subsequent attacks had been hysterical; there could be no doubt of that. He could scarcely have been wrong in his diagnosis of the disease. as it passed from chronic hysteria to hypochondriasis, even though slight tetanic symptoms had been observable on more than one occasion. According to Dr. Armstrong (and he was a good authority), such symptoms were frequently present in one phase of hysteria. And yet Mrs. Booth had died from pronounced tetanus. There could be no mistake!

Mistake! Could Jones, his assistant, have made any mistake in the last box of pills? Could he have mixed the mass so imperfectly that the strychnia and other ingredients were not sufficiently homogeneous, or had he measured the proportions with insufficient care, so that the strychnia preponderated?

Had Mrs. Booth, to obtain quicker relief, taken two pills at a time instead of one? That model nurse could surely not have made any such mistake! Yet he remembered having on a former occasion put the question if an overdose (of a somewhat analogous mixture in a liquid form) had been administered.

Surely that composed, clear-headed woman, whose praises he

had sung in the ears of many a careless nurse, could not be subject to fits of abstraction or forgetfulness, and have given one dose above another unconsciously, unwitting the drugs with which she was dealing?

Surely—but the doctor's speculations were so many, so involved and complex, we cannot follow them. But we may follow him into his surgery, and see him turn over his prescription-book, and read out—"*Ferri Redacti, forty grains; Zinci Valerianatis, twenty grains; Strychniæ, one grain; Glycerini, quan. suff.*, and then re-read, and after saying, "Twenty pills; no, that is right enough!" open his eyes as if struck with a sudden thought, and mutter, under his breath, "The woman can never have read the label wrong, and given three pills at one dose, instead of one pill three times a day?"

A cold moisture came on his forehead, and, contrary to his ordinary practice, he had himself recourse to a stimulant to steady his own nerves, and enable him to think the matter out. Either he had mistaken the patient's case, or there had been some mistake with the medicine, or some maladministration—careless or wilful.

Whatever view he took of the matter, he felt himself perplexed and confounded. His practice would be ruined if he admitted that he had mistaken true tetanus for hysteria; or that he had sent from his surgery medicaments so imperfectly compounded, or so indistinctly labelled, that death was dealt out by his remedial agents. What should he do? If he were to put too many questions to the Booths, he would suggest either doubts of his own efficiency, or that of Miss Dent; possibly—who could tell?—rouse suspicions, and cast an unfair imputation on that very estimable young person, whose interest clearly lay in the life, not the death, of her kind patroness.

Yet, though he closed the book, and sat down to his solitary supper (he was a bachelor) with the conviction that such suspicion was preposterous, the suspicion *had* presented itself to him, however hastily dismissed.

But being a man wise in his own generation, and not caring to create doubts which might probably injure himself, and would certainly cause his good friends additional distress, he wrote out a certificate of death when he had finished his supper, so that it might be in readiness for Daniel Dent when he should call for it on the morrow, on his way along with his sister to the registrar's and the cemetery.

"Very kind of these two to relieve their employer of so much that would be painful. But then, to be sure, Miss Dent, having

been with the good lady in her last moments, is the proper person for the duty," was the doctor's mental comment as they left the surgery with the important slip of paper the next morning.

"I don't see how I could have done any other than give that certificate," argued the doctor with himself, after the respectful brother and sister were out of sight. "She had been ill a very long time, had had many similar attacks, and I should not be justified in throwing the onus of death on either myself or Jones, though he is not so steady or particular as I could wish, and the case may be perfectly natural after all—hysteria stimulates so many diseases. Besides, were I to hint to Booth that his wife's life could have been saved by any possibility of care, or forethought, or science, I should make the man and his interesting children miserable for life. No, no; I have done quite right. It is best to leave well alone."

He resumed his place at his breakfast-table, threw his clean white handkerchief across his knee, and chipped his eggs, and sipped his coffee, only half content with his decision, because he was only half convinced that he had done his own best for the dead lady; and then, leaving his last cup of coffee to grow cold, he reached two or three medical works from a book-case older than himself, and, with one elbow on the table and his forefinger on that high cheek-bone of his, and the other forefinger between the leaves to turn them over, refreshed his memory with the opinions of his medical brethren on cases analogous.

At The Willows all was indescribable misery. Death had, indeed, made havoc of a happy home.

Until Ralph Hyde had been killed it had been one of the cosiest and happiest homes in England. Affection had knit the bonds which held the family together, and the interests of all were identical. But Ralph Hyde had been the rudder of the ship, and that gone, the vessel seemed the sport of the waves, and ready to break up.

Both Caroline and her father realised something of this, as they sat once more in that back parlour, with the green Venetians down, through which the grey daylight streaked faint lines upon the floor. But they felt only the dark bars of shadow; and the canary felt the shade as well, and was mute.

Even the fire did not burn cheerfully, the ready poker lacked the ready hand, and the ruddy coals went into mourning.

Breakfast was sent away almost untasted, yet William, and Caroline, and their father sat in their places, sad and silent. William was the first to speak.

"I don't think you've ever been the same, father, since Uncle Ralph died. I've watched you come into this room many a time, as if looking round for him, and go away without a word, as if at a loss for something."

"Ah, Willie, lad, nothing's gone right since then. I've not the same business faculty that he had, and it might have been worse but for that clever clerk of ours. But half-a-dozen Dents would not replace Uncle Ralph! And now, in barely five months, his sister has followed him—the dear wife I have lived with so happily these eighteen years! There can be no replacing a loss like that!"

And, as his bowed head sank with a sigh on his hands, tears found their way between his fingers, and fell on the black cat dozing at his feet.

William had hopped with one crutch to his father's side, and putting his slight arm round the bent neck, he whispered, consolingly—

"Carry and I will do the best we can to make you happy, father—won't we, Carry?"

"Indeed, father, we will, and there is no fear of my leaving you for any other home now. Frederick is gone; there will be no one to divide my attention from yourself," said she, in a voice where emotion was kept back by a painful effort of self-control.

"Ah! my dear, there was another loss; I am sure I miss that fine young man as if he were my son. You have your own troubles to bear, my darling," and he smoothed one hand over her golden-brown hair. "But you have hope before you. Fred will come back some day, and then—Ah! no one knows the loss of the wife but the widowed! And such a wife! There is no balm for a loss like that;" and now he wept in concert with his children.

"There is a balm for all sorrow, father," whispered the boy, "if you——"

There was a tap at the door. Miss Dent and her brother came quietly in, their very looks expressive of sorrow for the sorrows of those before them. They had executed their commissions, and came to say so: but—a drifting feather will show the current of the wind—they did not wait for invitations to be seated. True, they took such chairs as were ranged frigidly against the wall, and did not remove them: but five months previously they would have remained standing until told to sit.

There was a knock at the front door. By Miss Dent's order, all visitors were to be ushered into the morning-room, where she proposed to receive them, to "spare Miss Booth's feelings.

Becka had been instructed to call Miss Dent out, and hand visitors' cards to her; but Becka, for some undiscovered reason —perhaps a taint of Jane's objection to "new mistresses"— opened the door and announced—

"Mrs. Marsden and Miss Sophia."

There was mild reproof in the glance of Miss Dent cast on the forgetful maid, as she rose with more briskness than ordinary, and almost interposing between the door and Caroline's path, suggested in her customary bland voice—

"Had I not better relieve you of this task, Miss Booth? Your friends may probably wish to go upstairs" (she did not say to look upon the dead), "and it will be painful for you to accompany them."

"Thank you, Miss Dent. If *acquaintances* call, I shall be glad to avail myself of your services," said Caroline, with natural dignity, yet sufficient gentleness. "These are *friends*—dear friends; I cannot receive them by deputy," and she put Miss Dent aside, unobservant of the peculiar smile which filled that young person's face.

In the arms of her true friends, Caroline's pent-up sorrow found vent. Together they went upstairs to gaze upon the features, set in death, which bore evidence of the final convulsions, and there those questions were asked and answered relative to "last hours" which are part and parcel of such visits.

They had come to see the sick, and the drawn blinds had been the first intimation that they visited the dead. To Mrs. Marsden the shock had been especially great; she and Mrs. Booth had been friends for so very many years.

But when she learned from Caroline's bitter self-reproaches that she had not arrived in time to soothe a pang, or hear a last word, her own grief gave way before her desire to console and comfort the motherless girl now convulsed with passionate sobbing.

It appeared that Mr. Booth himself, having gone to Astley that afternoon, had barely reached home in time to see his wife expire.

Altogether it was most melancholy; and Mrs. Marsden offered like service to that rendered on the former occasion.

Caroline seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Very little fresh mourning will be required, Mrs. Marsden; and that, Miss Dent has already ordered to be sent in for selection."

"Indeed! Of course she will make your new dresses?"

"I suppose so; but, indeed, I have scarcely given the matter

a thought. I have left it with Miss Dent. She is very kind, and takes a great deal off my hands," said Caroline, with a sigh as if of satisfaction to be so relieved.

"My dear," gravely remarked Mrs. Marsden, "I fear your willingness to let Miss Dent take so much off your hands will end in her taking too much off your hands. It is not wise to surrender the reins of government to a dependent."

Caroline had supposed that Miss Dent would exercise her own office; but that self-contained person gave the young lady to understand that dressmaking was incompatible with the functions of a housekeeper, and that, in Miss Booth's own interest, she had asked Miss Smith if she could undertake the work.

With Mrs. Marsden's caution in her mind Caroline felt somewhat annoyed at this, but she was in too much real trouble even to dissent; and so Miss Smith was dressmaker, not only to Caroline, but to the very Miss Dent who five months before had come there herself in that capacity.

Mrs. Booth was buried. The doctor's certificate was sufficient.

The doctor himself was present at the funeral; and the lady was known to have been ill so long that few of the people he met made other remark to him than, "So, your patient's gone at last! Well, creaking gates won't hang on one hinge for ever."

The funeral being over, it was Caroline's intention to reduce their domestic establishment, and dispense with the housekeeper as a superfluity. But while she pondered how best to do it gracefully, and at the same time requite the services Miss Dent had rendered, over and above the question of salary, that which William had long before prognosticated took place.

Caroline herself was taken ill. And no wonder.

CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW SPECIFIC.

CAROLINE'S disorder was a low, nervous fever, which kept her prostrate during the winter months, but health and elasticity came with the first snowdrops.

Possibly, letters received from Frederick Marsden might have something to do with the favourable change.

Sophia was at The Willows when the said letters came. She had volunteered to nurse her friend, remarking that "Miss Dent looked somewhat jaded"—as no doubt she did.

The fact was, that Mr. Ashcroft's unprecedented attention and watchfulness of the case had made the housekeeper more feverishly anxious than could have been expected from anyone but a relative. Whether she was sensible that the doctor watched *her* as well as his patient was best known to herself; it is certain that she scrupulously fulfilled his orders to the minutest detail, and yet suffered neither Mr. Booth nor William to lack attention.

It was not surprising that she showed signs of fatigue, and when Miss Marsden offered to nurse her friend, alternately with Miss Dent, the latter was not sorry.

The change for the patient was desirable; for although Miss Dent, and her brother also, were truly anxious for Miss Booth's recovery, the housekeeper's quietude became oppressive, and Sophia's vivacity was a beneficial relief.

"A foreign letter for Caroline! Oh, give it to me, William; I love to be the bearer of good news!" exclaimed Sophy, who, hearing the postman, had hurried downstairs with a sort of prevision.

Miss Dent was also in the hall, and put out her hand involuntarily to check the advance of William with the letter.

"Pardon me, Miss Marsden. I think that letter had better be withheld from Miss Booth—at least for the present. Excitement might be dangerous."

"Dangerous—fiddlestick! Don't you believe it, William; but give me the letter," seeing him hesitate. "One half of Caroline's illness is a fit of the mopes, and that letter will work a cure. You see if it doesn't."

"If you think so, Miss Marsden——" began William, dubiously, resting on his crutches.

"Think so! I'm sure! It will be better than all the physic in Dr. Ashcroft's surgery. I've no faith in medicine—I see so much of the stuff at home. If our house were to sink in the ground and a duck-pond take its place, there could not be more quack, quack, quackery than at present. It's my opinion that drugs kill as often as they cure. What do you think, Miss Dent?"

What brought that cold grey hue over Miss Dent's ordinarily sallow skin, as Sophia looked her full in the face? The question was common enough.

But the lively speaker had the letter in her hand by this time, and the other evaded a reply by saying—

"I think, Miss Marsden, you had better wait and hear what Dr. Ashcroft says."

As Sophia tripped up the stairs she looked over her shoulder, and nodding back, said, "I'll think of it."

But thought with her was a flash, and what she thought was this, "And leave the poor girl to worry herself with wondering what the postman brought, as if she did not know that all her father's letters go to the works. If Miss Dent wants to keep letters back, she should muffle the knocker."

Caroline's room was the one immediately over the back parlour; an attic for the maids was higher still.

As Sophia approached the white dimity-hung bed, Caroline turned her weary head with a look of inquiry in her dull eyes.

"The doctor's boy with a fresh dose of physic!" said Sophy, answering the look.

"Is that all?" gasped Caroline, the old aspect of weariness returning to her face. "I'm tired of physic."

"Ah, but this is an entirely new specific, to be administered with extreme caution." (Caroline's attention was aroused.) "It is the best South Americano-Frederiko-Penandinko!"

As Sophia drawled the words out, Caroline gradually raised herself on her elbow, and her lips parted in expectation.

"Oh, Sophy!"

"Oh, Caroline!"

"Give it to me," said Caroline faintly, but eagerly, as she put out her hand.

"Stop, my dear," answered Sophy, with a sly twinkle in her merry eyes, as bit by bit the letter emerged from beneath the cape of her morning dress. "Are you strong enough to bear so strong a medicament? It must be given in infinitesimal doses."

"Oh, strong enough, Sophy. It will put fresh life into me."

"Well, judging from the present effects, I think I may venture on a full dose;" and Sophy surrendered the letter into Caroline's hands, to be kissed and wept over before it was opened or a line read.

When Mr. Ashcroft came, in the course of his rounds, he found his patient sitting up in a reclining chair by the fire, better and brighter, and with a stronger pulse than he had thought possible.

"We are getting well," said he, buoyantly. "I think that last mixture has done our young patient good;" and he looked at Sophia. Miss Dent was not in the room.

"That is precisely my opinion, doctor," was Sophia's demure reply, the strife between gravity and fun making strange lines in her countenance.

"And I think we cannot do better than repeat the prescription."

A faint, sweet smile spread over Caroline's features.

Sophia's beamed with merriment, and a ripple of laughter broke from her lips—something unwonted by that sick couch.

He was about to raise his hand to repress it by gesture.

"I think so, too; but I am afraid that is beyond your power, Dr. Ashcroft;" and a touch of feeling sobered the sally.

"Beyond my power?" he echoed.

"We have tried a new and powerful specific, doctor." He drew himself up like a man aggrieved.

"Miss Dent objected to the trial."

"Invaluable woman, that Miss Dent," thought he.

"It is a new foreign balsam—the Americano-Frederiko-Penandinko."

Even Mr. Ashcroft's face puckered with smiles now.

"Ah, I see! A compound of Amaranto Rhapsodia! Well, I'm content to be superseded, and think an occasional repetition of the dose may do no harm."

Whatsoever Sophia, the doctor, Mr. Booth, and William might think of the letter which Frederick had sent from Bahia—and which, as the old practitioner opined, contained more of a lover's rhapsody and anguish at separation than of absolute intelligence—there were two under that roof, before the day was out, who held a somewhat different dogma.

Before he went home from the works in the evening—by the way, he lodged with the family who had charge of the post-office—Daniel Dent came up to the house, along with Mr. Booth, to ascertain his daughter's condition, according to invariable practice; an act of attention for which the kindly, but not too far-seeing bleacher was profoundly grateful.

He was, as a rule, asked into the parlour (the family seldom occupied any other room now, on account of its general convenience, and its proximity to kitchen and stairs); and on one or two occasions, Mr. Booth, glad to escape from his own thoughts, had invited him to tea.

Daniel Dent was mounting upwards, and these were but steps in the ladder.

That evening Mr. Booth and William had been in high spirits, and the letter which had worked such a miracle in the sick-room was the theme of conversation; Mr. Booth making no secret of what news it contained; though there was still a visible barrier of condescension on the one hand, and deference on the other, which sufficiently marked out the servant and his principal.

Miss Dent, with a shawl thrown loosely over her head, as usual, accompanied her brother to the front gate when he retired, closing the door behind her.

"And so that letter has really made her better!" were the first words Daniel uttered when they were clear of the house.

"Yes! Are you not glad that she is better?" was his sister's answer to his tone, rather than to his words.

"Glad! God knows I am, but not through such a channel. Could you not have kept the letter back?" was his sharp and somewhat contradictory reply.

There was some petulance in Miss Dent's retort.

"How could I? That fly-away Miss Marsden was down the stairs, and whisked the letter out of William's hand in spite of all my arguments. Her wits are as quick as her feet, and her words are swift and sharp as arrows. She shot one at me that almost made me stagger, and I am pretty well word-proof."

"What did she say?"

She whispered in his ear.

"I think, Harriet, you ought to be proof against a random shot like that. You must be more circumspect, or you will ruin all; and the danger is yours, not mine, you know."

"Oh, Daniel!" in a reproachful tone stirred him to say—

"Well, well—we're both in for it, and there's all the more need for caution. But we must make no more haste than good speed. I'm making myself a necessity to him over there"—his thumb indicated the works—"and I think your position is pretty sure here."

"I mean it to be," was her answer, dryly given. "Good night."

It so happened that Miss Sophia's attention to her friend

brought her into frequent contact with an individual disposed to show considerable attention to herself, and that without any preconcerted arrangement.

There was a kind of a broad walk, or esplanade, at the back of the house, shadowed in the summer by limes, laburnums, and syringas, and this esplanade was paved with small, smooth, white, and dark-grey pebbles, arranged in a fanciful device of Mr. Hyde's in preference to gravel, which, he said, "was generally dusty in summer and squashy in winter." Even the garden walks were paved with oyster-shells, and were always white and dry to the feet.

It might be that Miss Marsden's ears were as quick as Miss Dent affirmed her wits to be, and that from Caroline's room she could distinguish advancing footsteps upon this hard pavement; or perhaps William's crutches made themselves heard; at all events, it happened pretty often that either at the foot of the stairs (which came close to the parlour door) or in the parlour itself, the Rev. John Hay had the happiness of shaking hands with a young lady whose complexion at such times was never in its normal condition, and whose errands and messages were of the flimsiest, and sometimes forgotten altogether.

I would not insinuate that Sophia threw herself in the Rev. John's way—the very suggestion would have shocked her; but there was certainly a law of attraction, or gravitation, or sympathy, or affinity, or something else, which continually brought these two into contact, if only for the briefest of moments.

No matter to them that William, or Mr. Booth, or ubiquitous Miss Dent was present, or that Becka came in to lay a cloth, or to make up the fire, their eyes shone upon each other, and that was enough. She had spoken truth when she told Tom no *word* of love had passed between them; but if ever eyes spoke to eyes, theirs had so spoken.

There had been times when converse neared the borderland, and words trembled on his lips, to die unspoken, because he had little besides his curacy, had small hope of preferment, and feared to ask the rich cotton-spinner's daughter to share his humble lot.

But the last few months had made him better acquainted with the inner life of the Marsdens, and he began to think even the home of a poor curate, and the "dinner of herbs," with love to season the feast, might be preferable to the mansion where the "stalled ox" was embittered by malevolence.

She was twenty-one, and her own mistress. What matter if

her father sent her forth, as he had sent his son, without a shilling? Well, no one could say he was mercenary.

Ah, but Mr. Hay did not know that which gossips in such a case would credit him with knowing—that the old aunt (her mother's maiden sister), with whom Sophia's early days had been spent, had left her favourite niece nine thousand pounds, to be paid for her exclusive use, either on her marriage or on her twenty-second birthday. A small allowance she had had for pocket money from the date of her aunt's death; but there had been many drafts upon that for the comfort of those dear to her, apart from her own wardrobe. The father's purse-strings opened only to Tom.

A smile of more than ordinary import lighted up the curate's grave face as they exchanged salutations in the parlour the day after Fred's letter had brought a ray of sunshine to flicker over The Willows.

"I am especially happy to have met you this morning, Miss Marsden"—holding her hands, which he did not readily release, even though Miss Dent followed closely on his heels, apparently to bring back to the old-fashioned cellaret a wine decanter she had previously carried out for some invalid cookery.

"Why especially this morning?" thought Miss Dent, whose back was towards them.

He waited a few moments, perhaps thinking that Miss Dent would disappear; but the decanters seemed to be out of place, and needed readjusting. The placid woman dropped the keys, and did not readily hit upon the right one to re-lock the cellaret; then the fire required stirring, or she thought so; then her dress dragged the cloth table-cover away, and she had to put it straight; and so she contrived to linger until Mr. Hay, rather than suggest a mystery, added—

"I shall have occasion to go to Tyldesley this afternoon, and should you have any message to Mrs. Marsden, I shall be gratified to be the bearer."

"Oh! is that all?" thought Miss Dent. "What a little matter is an especial occasion to people in love!—and anyone with eyes may see that those two people, as different as light and dark—he tall, slim, silent, sedate; she plump, talkative, frisky—are over head and ears in love with each other. Not much cut out for a poor curate's wife! I wonder if Daniel has seen them together?" and so wondering, she left them, with William there to play propriety.

Sophia Marsden was quicker at fitting a key than Miss Dent had been; and she, to show that she understood fully the nature of his mission to Tyldesley, answered—

"You are very kind, Mr. Hay. I should like you to say, if you have the opportunity, that Miss Booth has had a letter from my brother Fred, written from Bahia; that he wrote in good health and spirits, and that his letter has given to our patient just the fillip she needed."

"So I have had the pleasure of hearing," remarked the curate, without interrupting her.

She went on, "And, Mr. Hay"—and here she looked significantly up into his face—"if my mother should also have received a communication, pray ask her to entrust it to your keeping for my perusal."

She knew that he had one in his pocket, even then.

"I will do your mission faithfully. But is that the whole of your message?"

She laughed. "You can ask if the Ogre contrives to exist without me; and"—her tone changed again—"you can give my dear, dear love to my mother."

"That is indeed a precious trust," he murmured, in an almost inaudible whisper; whilst William, not so obtuse as he had been seven months before, cried out simultaneously—

"Oh, Sophia, but suppose he kept your *dear love* for himself, and forgot to deliver it? What then?"

"What then?"

The boy, enlivened by good news from abroad and overhead, had, in unthinking jest, put the very question which had lingered on the curate's lips so long. He had spoken from his low chair by the fire; they were standing in the wide bay under the canary's cage, the curate between Sophia and the youth who had thus, as it were, thrown a match into a powder mine.

Sophia's face had been rosy before—now the swift blood came surging up to the very roots of her light-brown hair; and but that John Hay, losing his presence of mind, as swiftly grasped her hands again, she would have fallen. The voice, sweeter to her than all others, repeated as an echo close to her bewildered ear, "What then?"

Recalled to herself, steadied by that strong, eager clasp, that earnest voice, she looked up to encounter eyes that looked into her very soul.

"He must keep it!" burst from her lips, as, startled at her own temerity, she tore her hands from his detaining ones, rushed from the room, and took refuge in the morning-room across the hall.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HAY-HARVEST IN SPRING.

WHEN Sophia Marsden—so inadvertently surprised out of her heart's secret by a mere boy's playful sally—dashed obliquely across the hall to that pleasant room overlooking the front garden, she was guided less by reason than an instinctive perception that she could not carry her excitement upstairs to disturb Caroline.

She left the curate standing in a maze of joy and bewilderment, hardly able to grasp the reality; the startled canary hopping and fluttering about also in a state of excitement, and William looking as thoroughly perplexed as boy could look.

"I'm very sorry," began he. "I'm sure I meant no harm, Mr. Hay."

The gentleman addressed, whose gaze was fixed on the open door, through which Sophia's black and white print dress had disappeared, turned round with a face brighter than William had ever seen it.

"And *I* am very glad, my boy. I do not believe you have done any harm. But, for Miss Marsden's sake, I trust you will not mention what you have heard. I must follow the young lady to explain and apologise."

Sophia had deep feelings under her vivacious manner. He found her standing in front of a window with one hand to her forehead, looking out, yet seeing nothing, like one in a trance, as if, confused and stunned by what had happened, she was asking herself if it could be real.

She did not hear him turn the handle of the door or close it. It was not until he put his arm softly around her, and drew her within the friendly shadow of the crimson damask curtains, that she was conscious of his presence, and then her tell-tale face dropped into her veiling hands.

But there was another's tender hand, itself tremulous with joy, at liberty to uncover that blushing, handsome face, and raise it to meet his own.

"Will you, indeed, trust me with your 'dear love,' Sophia?" he whispered, in a tone of deep tenderness; "and may I, indeed, keep it all to myself?"

She tried to conjure up a saucy answer, but the words would not come; tears were falling in their stead.

"Sophia, have you not one word for me? Have I offended you? Have I—Oh! have I misunderstood you?"

Lower his tall head had bent to hers, closer his enfolding arms held her to him, when "No, John," in a murmur little more than a breath, reached his anxious ear, and his lips touched her forehead before she could hide it in his breast.

Rapture is not talkative. They stood entranced, their beating hearts more eloquent than words. The clang of the bleacher's dinner bell roused them to a consciousness of time, and the possibility of gossipry. His tender kisses fell on her lips, as he said,

"You have no secrets from your mother, dearest? I may name this to her?"

"Yes, John, dear; but you must let her have a large slice of the love I have given to you!"

And Sophia, who was evidently coming back to her senses, with a merry smile, broke away from his clasp and hurried upstairs to arrange at once her disordered hair and her disordered wits, so as to be presentable when the one o'clock dinner, which they were too genuine to call luncheon, was on the table.

Neither Fred's letter nor Sophia's message was delivered that day.

Mrs. Marsden was not alone when the Rev. John Hay was announced. Tom accompanied her into the parlour, where there was no fire to make a visitor comfortable; but for once he seemed to endure the cold for the sake of outstaying the caller, and cracked his knuckles, and joined in the casual conversation with as much glee as if he knew he was not wanted.

Of course Mrs. Marsden, aware of the reverend gentleman's tutorial connection with the Booths, made earnest inquiries respecting Caroline's health, and thus gave him an opportunity to acquaint her with the arrival of a letter from her son, and its marvellous effect upon the young lady. He knew that Mr. Tom was sure to learn so much out of doors, and there was no use in affecting mystery.

It was a relief to the mother's heart to know that her son was safe and well; but her pious "Thank God!" only drew from her other amiable son the sneering remark,

"Some people are thankful for small mercies!"

"And some are *never* thankful, sir," dropped like a rebuke from Mr. Hay.

Whereupon Tom, who set up as a model of piety and virtue amongst strangers, endeavoured to put another face on his *lapsus linguæ*, but he was not very successful.

Miss Emma, not being interested in "curates of the Establish-

ment," did not think it worth while to present herself, but sat sewing in her own room in the cold. She had done this for some time; though what she sewed, or where she found money for materials, unless she was charitably stitching for the Ebenezer Dorcas Society, no one could make out. Her drawers and boxes were as closely locked as her lips.

A day or two later Mr. Hay was more successful. He presented himself before Sophia at The Willows, the bearer of her mother's blessing on their love, and of Fred's letter; and, the curate being permitted to look over the young lady's shoulder as she read, suppose we avail ourselves of the same privilege.

"On board the Barque *Laura*,
"Bahia, S. America, Sept. 18th, 185—

"My dear, dear Mother and Sister,

"I have never had much experience in letter-writing. All my friends have been around me, and what I wanted to say I could say by word of mouth; so you must excuse all deficiencies, as I find it very difficult to express myself on paper, and it comes very awkward to handle a pen after a belaying-pin or a marlinspike. My dear mother, you cannot tell what I felt when we dropped down Channel—or worse, when we got out of sight of land altogether. I don't mean the awful sea-sickness—though that made me feel as if I should like to lie down and die; and I think I should never have struggled through it but for Sambo, the black cook. All the rest of the sailors (and worst of all, Bennoch, the captain's apprentice) called me a greenhorn and a land-lubber, and spiced their speech with oaths which would have made you shudder. Bennoch amused himself with styling me the 'milksop,' because I did not choose to blister my tongue with burning words; but as soon as I got my sea-legs I taught my gentleman better manners after a new fashion of mine. I don't put up with sneers and taunts now, dear mother. I make my own hand save my own head. It's the only way to hold your own on shipboard. And I think they respect me more because I don't swear than if I did. Captain Dambrill was very polite to me on shore, and treated me as a gentleman; but he told me that when once on board he could make no difference between me and any other common sailor, and I have found it to be so. At first it was very hard work, and the ropes running through my hands carried the skin with them; but I got over that, and my palms and fingers are almost like horn now. But don't fret about that, mother; the pain in my hand was never half so hard to bear as the pain in my heart at home, and hard work will do me good. I feel more

of a man than ever I was, and hope to come back more worthy of my dear Caroline. Be as mother and sister to her in my absence, for my sake. But I need scarcely ask for that, I am sure you will.

"You will want to know something of my voyage. It has not been a favourable one; we were terribly beaten about in the Bay of Biscay, and again off the coast of Brazil; we lost our galley, and were three days without any cooked victuals; then our rudder parted, and it took all our captain's seamanship to carry us into port.

"We are staying here to refit. Whilst discharging our cargo, not a man was allowed ashore. Weary as we were, we were kept hard and close at it; and the labour is terrible—everything to be hoisted by cranes, not only from the ship, but from level to level: for the town of Bahia rises upwards from the water, and is built terrace above terrace. Now that the barque is in the shipwrights' hands, we have more liberty. My first night ashore had like to have been my last. I suppose you know that there is no twilight in the tropics.

"Well, I was glad enough to stretch my legs and look about me, everything in Bahia was so new and strange; the houses, the trees, the fortifications, the pyramidal magazines, the steep ascents from street to street, the people, the dresses; and the speech seemed all a jabber to me.

"I was making my way back to St. Bartholomew's harbour, leaving most of our fellows at one wine-house or another, when down came the night at one swoop, like a thick veil dropped over a lady's face, and took me by surprise; and not a pleasant surprise either in that steep city of forts and terraces, when a false step might pitch one headlong.

"I stopped suddenly at a corner, puzzled which way to turn in the dark (not a pitch dark as in England), and I think that sudden stop saved your son's life, mother! A man muffled in a large cloak, with a broad sombrero shading his face, darted from under the covert of a piazza, and with his full force aimed a blow at me with a stiletto. The dagger, meant to plunge between my shoulders, or into the nape of my neck, passed dangerously near my face; but falling on air, as I jerked backward, the impetus threw the man off his guard, and I was able to catch his hand before another blow could be struck. We had a struggle; but I have grown strong, and bore the man to the ground. In falling he was wounded by his own dagger; and I don't feel sorry for it—the assassin! Of course there was an uproar, and we were taken before the Alcalde. It ended in

an *apology from the man*, who said *he had mistaken me for some one else*. I have not been out at nightfall since. I have already written to Caroline, but I have not told this adventure to her. It might alarm her needlessly. Write to me at the post-office, Melbourne, and tell me all the news.

"I suppose Emma is as staid as ever, and would be shocked at the thought of a beau. As *brotherly love* is not forbidden by her class-leader, I presume you may offer her mine. Let me have your blessing and your prayers, dear mother, and have no fears for the welfare of

"Your affectionate son,

"FRED. MARSDEN.

"P.S.—My love and thanks to Sophia. Ask her to send word what sort of a *harvest* there has been."

Reading the letter over Sophia's shoulder, we could not fail to note the crop of blushes the postscript raised, nor the harvest of kisses Mr. Hay gathered from her ripe lips, much more warmly than might have been expected from a curate so composed and grave. But the heart of a "reverend divine" is only the heart of a man, after all!

Leaving Sophia to her laugh, as she folds the letter up, and makes a demure pretence of rebuking her lover's presumption, while the canary tells tales to all who understand him, and William's crutch is heard coming from Caroline's room, we will steal a few words from the letter Carry takes out to re-read for the twentieth time:—

"I have a small present for you, my darling, which I will send to England when the *Laura* makes its return voyage, and leaves me behind to make a fortune for you. Artificial flowers copied from Nature, and very accurate imitations, too, made of the feathers of Brazilian birds. You will find a wreath of orange blossoms in the box, which you must keep to wear on our wedding-day—a day I look forward to with hope, even at this distance, and the future all to find. But I am hopeful and sanguine, and love you more intensely than ever, though we are so far apart."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SHELLS.

It was not long before Caroline—to the great joy of William and Mr. Booth, and to the relief of the servants—was downstairs again, and able to dispense with a nurse.

Sophia Marsden, not altogether to the satisfaction of either herself or the Rev. John, went back to Tyldesley Banks; and much to her astonishment, and still more to her dissatisfaction, Mr. Thomas had the unprecedented gallantry to drive over to The Willows for her.

He was dressed in his best suit (not the suit kept for private parade), had his hair brushed to hide the premature baldness at his temples, and a tuft of snowdrops in his button-hole.

He had evidently done his best to make himself captivating; but whether he had any crude idea of bewitching his brother's betrothed, or from pure love of mischief hoped to balk the curate of a homeward *tête-à-tête* with his sister, was not declared. Possibly both motives had served as spurs to his politeness.

However, there he was, and, whatever his motive, did his best, after his clumsy fashion, to make himself agreeable to Caroline, who, still pale (she was always interesting), sat in an easy-chair by the fire-side, remote from the door, in that front morning-room of which Sophia would carry away such agreeable reminiscences. The drawing-room was only to be reached by a long passage leading from the hall between that morning-room and the kitchen, and was consequently rarely used save on state occasions; and the other, with its tasteful paper, its crimson-covered furniture and drapery, and its cheerful outlook, was quite as pleasant.

But Tom was more at home in a kitchen than a parlour, and could not sit still. Having exhausted the topic of the weather, which was remarkably open for the season, inquired after the health of Mr. Booth, expressed an interest in William's knee, and sent his compliments to Mr. Daniel Dent *viâ* Miss Dent (who came noiselessly in and out with small matters for the convalescent young lady), and having given his knuckles a preliminary crack, he fidgetted in his chair, rose, then fidgetted about the room. (Sophia was an unusual length of time getting ready.) Then he turned over the leaves of a book upon the table, seated himself on the damask couch, where Sophia only the week before

had made sweet confession of love to her tall Anglican priest; and having quite involuntarily edged himself round the room, came to a standstill in front of a whatnot placed against the wall, within reach of Caroline's hand.

A fine group of humming-birds under a glass shade crowned the whatnot; but on a lower shelf, amongst relics of old china and other nick-nacks, on a pair of pretty crochet mats reposed the shells he had given to Caroline, as if promoted to a place of honour. Close beside them lay a small morocco case. He took it up, but put it down again with sufficient haste.

It contained a capital daguerreotype of his brother Fred in his pea-jacket, a portrait which had been sent to her from Liverpool before he sailed.

To cover his confusion, Tom remarked, with not too much tact—

"I am glad to see you set some store by my shells."

"What shells?" asked Caroline, dreamily.

She had evidently forgotten them.

"The shells I brought from Southport, and gave to you at our house," he answered, surprised at her forgetfulness.

"Oh, ah! I remember now. Are they there?" And Caroline half turned her head to look.

Miss Dent had been leaving the room when he first mentioned the shells. The words seemed to arrest her footsteps. She turned back.

"Oh, Miss Booth, I took the liberty of placing the shells there. In unpacking the clothes you brought home with you, which, in your distress, you no doubt lost sight of, I found the shells, and put them there for safety. I quite forgot to name them to you."

Miss Dent left the room a little wiser than when she entered it, and Mr. Tom was most decidedly and uncomfortably snubbed.

He could hardly summon confidence to offer his snowdrops to Caroline, though he had brought them for the purpose, and had studied a pretty speech about snowdrops and purity and delicacy, with a suggestiveness of resemblance to herself, which somehow got into a strange jumble in actual utterance, and provoked an irrepressible smile when she accepted them. There was so little, so very little in common between snowdrops, and poetry, and awkward, angular, unbrotherly Tom Marsden!

Sophia was really dilatory, and he grew impatient—professedly for Smiler, waiting out in the cold, though a man was there keeping the animal in motion. She came at length, attended by

the Rev. John Hay, between whom and herself it was apparent there existed an undisguised understanding.

Nevertheless, it was something of a revelation to Tom when, after packing her carefully under the gig cover, "John" and "Sophia" shook hands, and said "Good afternoon."

He had another small surprise when, after settling himself, he lifted his eyes to bid the man "let go his head," and found that "my man" was no other than Scholes.

Scholes, the man who, unsuccessful in his search for his lost girl, had gone heart-broken back to Tyldesley, to find himself shut out from employment there, and had been taken on trial at the bleach-works by Daniel Dent, for Mr. Booth.

Another bunch of snowdrops was offered to Caroline before the day was turned out of the current calendar, and by a not dissimilar cavalier. Daniel Dent was neither ungainly nor ill-favoured, but he numbered as many years, if not as many wrinkles; and if a little more tender sentiment went with his offering, their honesty of purpose was pretty much on a par.

There was no doubt that Daniel Dent had conceived a strong passion for his master's daughter, and that he had set himself to the task of winning her; but that involved so much in its accomplishment, he did not dare to let a spark of that passion light up his leaden eyes in her presence, or that of his employer.

His was a patient, waiting soul. He did not fan the latent fire in his heart to a perceptible flame, but covered it up to keep his purpose warm, while he crawled upwards, noiseless as a caterpillar, to the ripe plum on the distant bough.

He must have felt he was creeping up surely when he could express to Mr. Booth, with however much humility, his desire to congratulate Miss Booth on her recovery, in person, and to present her with those pale emblems of herself rising from the bed of sickness. And he did feel himself creeping upwards when she thanked him sincerely for his offering, and for his many kind inquiries, and for all his sister's care of her.

He went home with something like a heart beating in his breast; which was more than could be said for Tom Marsden.

But ere he went there was another low-voiced conference at the gate; the very winds were not entrusted with their secrets.

"Who gave Miss Booth those other snowdrops, Harriet?" he asked.

"Mr. Thomas Marsden; he came for his sister, thank goodness!—I'm glad to be well rid of her—and he seemed on pins *and needles* all the while he stayed."

"Indeed! Did you hear anything he said?"

"Yes; but nothing worth remembering."

"And how did she receive his flowers?" The question, more than the tone, betrayed he had some jealous feeling on the subject.

"I think, Dan, she was half inclined to laugh at him, he did look such a gawky. You've nothing to fear from him—it's the other she frets about. I saw him take up that daguerreotype she's always looking at, and put it down as if it had bitten him. You should have seen how chapfallen he looked to find she had forgotten all about some sea-shells he brought from Southport for her."

Daniel pricked up his ears.

"Shells! What shells?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, those large white pearly shells on the whatnot. I found them in the trunk she had with her at Tyldesley. I'd no notion where they came from until to-day."

Then, with a long-drawn inspiration, as if recurring memory held back her breath, she added, pulling an old pill-box from her pocket—

"Ah! and I found *this* in one of the shells. I heard a rattle of something inside, and shook it out. I wonder if it is worth much?" and she held up a small earring, which sparkled and glittered in the moonlight.

"Worth *much!*" he cried, in low-voiced exultation, and the sparkle of the stones seemed to brighten up his dull eyes. "It is worth far more to us than the value of the stones. *Scholes found its fellow on his daughter's bed-quilt the morning she disappeared;*" and he tapped his forefinger on the top of the gate to emphasise his whispered words.

A very long-drawn "O-o-o-o-h!" told that Miss Dent could estimate the value of the trinket to them.

"Take care of it, Harriet; let no one see it, and have it always at hand," were his directions, as he shook hands with her. "But you are a very jewel of a sister, and I know I can rely on you."

She was deserving of the compliment—from him.

Tom and Sophia had a wordy sparring match on the way home, but she knew he dared not tell tales of her—and did not care much if he did; so his blows fell lighter than hers.

Once at home, she appeared to emulate her sister Emma's industry, and to be as mysterious over it.

The latter had been, for a long while, occupied with plain sewing, both openly and secretly, in her own chamber; and as she brought parcels of calico and linen into the house, and

took parcels of made-up linen out of the house, her mother accepted the sole answer she vouchsafed when questioned—

"I am helping a friend with her wedding outfit."

Who the friend was she did not say. Mr. Marsden conjectured it was one of the young girls with whom she was accustomed to "meet in class," and that was not contradicted. Mrs. Marsden knew that Emma's own scant pocket-money would not suffice to purchase for herself a third of the material she worked up.

Sophia's only mystery was concealment from the men-folk. She was putting invisible stitches into several pairs of French-cambric bands, intended to clasp the neck of the Rev. John Hay. Perhaps she fancied the work of her fingers might not be a bad substitute for the fingers themselves in their absence.

At all events, she stitched away busily, singing or chatting merrily the while. Her engagement was no secret to anyone in the house but her father, and she was wonderfully proud of the man who had chosen her, and whom she had set her heart upon long before he was prompted to speak out.

But after her absence from home she had many things to do besides stitching clerical bands; and a week or two elapsed before they were all completed.

Ann offered to clear-starch them for her; but no—only her own fingers must touch the dainty bits of broad-hemmed linen her John was to wear in the face of all the admiring ladies, the handsome-curate-worshippers in his congregation.

When they were "done up" to her satisfaction, they must be wrapped in the crispest of silky white tissue-paper, to await the coming of the tall, serious-faced lover.

But the tissue-paper was not forthcoming. She thought she knew where she could lay her hand upon it; but no tissue-paper could be found.

She went downstairs.

"Mother, have you moved some white tissue-paper from the old coffer in our room?"

Emma took up the ironing blanket Sophia had left on the table, folded and carried it to its drawer in the back kitchen.

"No, my dear; I did not know you had any tissue-paper," calmly answered Mrs. Marsden, who was at her old occupation, darning napery by the window—unreplaced household linen needs so much and frequent repairing.

"Oh, yes; a sheet or two of white were left when we cut the grate-aprons last summer, and they have lain there ever since. Have you seen any of that paper about, Ann?" and Sophia turned to the busy maid.

"Nawe, aw've seen nowt o' the soort! Happen Miss Emma's takken it to wrap summat in," suggested the domestic, as she in turn moved the box-iron and iron stand to their respective places.

Sophia met Emma in the hall, returning to the kitchen.

"Have you moved that tissue-paper, Emma? I am sure it was there the day Caroline Booth came. I saw it!"

Emma answered with what was unusual asperity for that placid young lady, "What should I know of your tissue-paper, I wonder?"

"Well, Emma, you need not be snappish. I thought you might perhaps have moved it somewhere else, or wrapped some of your friend's finery in it. I did not suppose you had taken it to make either a kite or a fire balloon of!"

"Then I've not wrapped my friend's finery in it. And I've not got your tissue-paper at all. What a fuss you make about it!" and giving her head a toss, Emma went to sit by herself in the cold parlour.

Sophia looked after her, amazed. Coming back into the kitchen, she gave her astonishment expression.

"What has come over our Emma? I might have accused her of theft, she snapped me up so sharply. I did not think she had so much spirit in her. I only wish she would show a little more of it at proper times. It would give piquancy to her manner. She is too insipid for my palate, as a rule."

"Aw think hoo's noan so quiet as hoo seems. Aw've seen her look black as a thunner-cleawd mony a toime, though hoo has na spokken a word," put in Ann, dryly.

Sophia had been cogitating.

"I've a pretty little box I can put the bands in, mother. That will be best after all. But I should like to know what *has* gone with that tissue-paper! I know it was there the day Mr. Booth brought Caroline. I wrapped a book-marker for William in a piece of it."

Ann turned her head suddenly, with something of a jerk; but she said nothing, and Sophia went upstairs, murmuring to herself—

"I wonder if Tom has been at that coffer whilst I was away, and taken it for anything!"

And with that she laid the transparent French-cambric bands in a dainty box and dismissed the paper from her mind. And the Rev. John Hay coming to see her in a straightforward, manly fashion in the course of a few days, box and contents passed into his possession, and she was thanked for them in a very lover-like manner.

But though the tissue-paper had disappeared, and never was seen again, Ann had a theory respecting it which she confided to Miss Sophia in course of time.

Barely three weeks from the day when Sophia missed it, something else was missing—something which set Simeon Marsden into a quiver of rage and fear.

Calm, placid, immobile Emma Marsden had disappeared as mysteriously as the tissue-paper.

She had gone, as usual, to a Dorcas meeting on the Wednesday evening, and never returned.

At ten o'clock Mrs. Marsden became alarmed; yet Tom, who suggested that the night air would kill him, was allowed to sit by the fire, whilst Ann, with a shawl loosely thrown over head, set out to meet her, not doubting but she was on her way home.

But she was not met; and on inquiry at houses where half the people were abed, Ann ascertained that she had not been to the Dorcas meeting—had not, in fact, been seen in town.

Even Tom's apathy was roused then. He and Emma had never come into collision, and he had a sort of passive liking for his more stolid sister.

He scoured the neighbourhood; but in so doing set tongues and heads wagging. Two disappearances from one household within eighteen months were enough to excite comment.

"Dear me! Miss Marsden not got home at this time of night? A young lady, too, so prim and so strict. Dear me!" was said by one.

"Perhaps your father's daughter has gone to look after Scholes's daughter!" laughed another, coarsely.

"Miss Emma not at home? Ah, I always thought what the class-meetings and prayer-meetings meant! I suppose you know that Job Hindley, her class-leader, left his situation to-day?" observed a third.

Tom got home white with rage and disappointment. Everybody out of doors had suspected what nobody at home had dreamed of. And everybody had assumed an elopement, and pointed to the draper's assistant, Job Hindley, her favourite class-leader, as the partner of her flight.

Had she been missed in the morning, her room would have been searched before filling the mouth of scandal; but amongst all the strange reasons assigned for her *late return home*, as it was at first supposed to be, none so unlikely as an elopement had presented itself.

Yet such it proved. Her drawers and boxes were empty, as

Fred's had been. The frequent parcels and much sewing were accounted for now.

Mrs. Marsden and Sophia shed tears of the bitterest shame and anguish, and over Mr. Marsden's mind swept ever and anon the memory of Scholes's malediction. He was not as good a father as Scholes—had not the same depth of affection; but this desertion of his child, so religiously reared too, made him feel in part what the working man must have felt.

To analyse Tom's feelings would be impossible, they were so complex. Perhaps he, too, thought of Scholes, and wondered if the two elopements tallied in all particulars.

There was a note in one of the otherwise empty drawers.

"DEAR MOTHER,

"I have had a very, very miserable and uncomfortable home, though it has been no fault of yours. I have left it for one of my own, where I hope there will be true godliness—no hypocrisy, no quarrelling, and no blasphemy. I am of full age, and have a right to please myself. I am going to marry my class-leader, Job Hindley, who is a pious and devout young man, who has the true riches, if he has not those my father and Tom set their covetous hearts on. I should not have gone off on the sly but for father's temper. I knew he would not have minded locking me up or beating me, to keep me from marrying a man without money. But we are not quite without means. When we are settled I will let you know; and don't think I have disgraced you. A pious man is better than a rich one. I daresay we shall be very comfortable.—I remain, your affectionate daughter,

"EMMA MARSDEN."

In a couple of days came the certificate of the marriage of Emma Marsden and Job Hindley, at the Parish Church of Bolton-le-Moors, so that in one respect scandal was laid to rest.

But Simeon Marsden, who had set his heart on wealth for himself, and wealthy matches for his children, gnashed his teeth and cursed her bitterly. He vowed she should never set foot in his house again; and plucking from his breast a will, which it seems he had carried about with him, he stuck it between the bars, and watched it burn to ashes.

He had risen upwards himself on the foundation of his wife's money; but that *his* daughter, the child of a rich cotton-spinner, should marry a common country linendraper's assistant, was unendurable. He did not take it into account that he had not fitted her for anything higher—had never surrounded her with the common tokens of easy circumstances.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MISS DENT'S DIPLOMACY.

CAROLINE BOOTH was not unappreciative of Miss Dent's kindness and attention to herself during her long prostration; nevertheless, her intention to get rid of that most assiduous individual remained unshaken.

Nay, as she rapidly approached convalescence, and took part in household affairs, she became only the more strengthened in her resolution. Not that Miss Dent was a whit less thoughtful and obliging, but rather that she was a little too much so, and somehow impressed a sense of obligation.

During her mother's lifetime she had yielded to Miss Dent's generalship, inasmuch as it had relieved herself and given pleasure to the invalid; but now she felt the very presence of a stranger an intrusion, and the continued sway of a housekeeper a slur on her own domestic qualifications.

True, she was only seventeen, but some girls at seventeen have the stability and the domestic capacity of women. Caroline was one of these; and as strength returned, she felt that duty called her to take her place at the head of the household.

But Miss Dent stuck like a barnacle, and was not to be dislodged.

She had made the best of the time when Caroline was ill and out of the way to render herself as much a necessity to Mr. Booth by his own fireside as Daniel had become at the works.

For some time prior to Mrs. Booth's sudden death, both Jane and Becka had demurred to receive orders from "so many mistresses;" but somehow the deputy had so contrived to hoodwink and conciliate them, by apparent self-abnegation, that the song of praise, of which Miss Dent was the theme, was echoed in kitchen and scullery *ad nauseam*. The canary was the only discriminating songster in the household, and it refused most pertinaciously to join the chorus. Perhaps he associated her presence with closed blinds and forgotten rations; at all events, Harriet Dent could never cajole him. If she showed her grey face and grey eyes at the bars of his pagoda-like cage, he would ruffle his yellow feathers, hop uneasily from perch to perch, and if she ventured a finger within his reach, would dart forward *and peck at it* viciously. Prophetic canary!

Caroline observed with surprise, and not without pain, that all those little attentions which her mother had been wont to lavish on her father were tendered by the housekeeper, and accepted by Mr. Booth as a matter of course. Not only were his Wellingtons and bootjack ready for him in the morning, his newspaper aired and folded, dainty tid-bits set before him at breakfast; his taste consulted at dinner; his slippers warmed and ready in the evening, and the tea-urn hissing to the moment; but he was turned out speckless morning and afternoon with little dabs of the clothes-brush in the hall; and at noon or evening was met at the door and relieved of overcoat or umbrella in the most natural way possible.

But she did not perceive how wants had been created the good gentleman had never previously known, how habits were slowly forming under encouragement, which her mother would never have suffered to germinate.

The parlour, where never a stray crumb, or thread, or shred of linen could have rested undisturbed for an hour; where the special oilcloth set to catch the split seed-husks cast out by the canary was swept as frequently as the fireplace; where never work, newspaper, book, or magazine was permitted to lie about when out of hands, was littered with odds and ends offensive to Caroline's orderly perceptions.

Among the ornaments of the mantel-shelf were papers, cards, and envelopes of letters brought to Mr. Booth in the morning from the works by Daniel Dent, when, as was often the case *now*, he outstayed the postal delivery over the breakfast-table, or over his after-dinner wine. And small stoppered bottles, containing alkalis, or crystals, or acids, or spirits, often lingered there, which were never found out of the laboratory when Uncle Ralph was alive. Then feathers, florets, and panicles of fancy grasses, fragments of lichen and moss, filaments of cotton wool, snippings of chenille, stuck to carpet and hearth-rug, and obstinately resisted removal. Never before had Caroline known the naturalist to ride his hobby in the family room, or that hobby to be so rampant.

She expected to see matters straight in a few weeks; but rowing against the stream is fatiguing work.

Miss Dent was always at hand with a reason or an apology whenever the other made the attempt.

"Father, you used to prepare your specimens in your own room; the gum and glue spoil the furniture, and I don't like to see the parlour so very different from what it used to be when——"

"Oh, Miss Booth, your father appears to be so melancholy and

lonesome shut up there with thoughts of sad changes for his only companions, that I took upon myself to suggest that it would be more comfortable and social to have him downstairs—especially as William, too, seemed to mope for want of some one to talk to."

Here were two shots—one for the father, one for the son—showing her thoughtful perception.

"Yes, Miss Dent, but the same reason does not exist now; and it makes such an unseemly mess. Mother would nev—" and Caroline stopped short.

"Certainly it does make a litter, but I never objected to clear it away, and it seems a pity to interfere with so scientific a recreation for the sake of a few scattered morsels of wool or grass," answered Miss Dent, with apologetic patronage; adding, in a slightly aggrieved tone, as she went down on the hearth-rug at Mr. Booth's feet to remove with her fingers débris which refused to obey the brush, "I am sure I made the unfortunate suggestion with the very best of motives; I should be very sorry to offend Miss Booth's sense of order, but I really did all for the best."

"And it is for the best, Miss Dent, the very best. Caroline, I am sure, had no desire to impugn the excellence of your intentions; and I do find it much more agreeable to pursue my studies here than in my own room," was Mr. Booth's comment on Miss Dent's apology.

"Yet," observed Caroline, "I have heard you tell mother that you preferred your own sanctum to any apartment in the house."

"Ah, my dear," sighed her father, "but circumstances alter cases;" with which worn-out proposition the controversy dropped, Miss Dent's foothold strengthened, not weakened.

A day or two later Caroline suggested to William that the parlour was scarcely the place for his chemicals.

"Neither is it, Carry; but I had them out to show Mr. Dent some curious chemical changes and effects. The next morning I forgot to take them back, and Miss Dent said it did not matter, as we might want them again."

"Always Miss Dent," thought Caroline. "Sophia Marsden was right."

But Mr. Hay saw the array of bottles in the parlour, and he himself carried them back to the laboratory, remarking—"These are dangerous things to leave about, my boy. There is no knowing what irreparable accidents may occur through careless exposure of potent drugs;" and William, seeing the force of his *remark, resolved* to be more particular in future.

A week elapsed. Miss Dent held her own, and more than her own, so quietly, yet so persistently, that Caroline resolved to bring the matter to an issue.

Seeing her father in the garden glancing at crocuses and daffodils, watching the fluttering of an early sulphur-butterfly and a pair of painted-ladies, and examining through a lens the green aphides clustered on the tender shoots of the rose-trees before lifting a lady-bird into their midst to swallow them wholesale, she put on a thick shawl and a garden-hat, for the air was somewhat chilly, and joined him, less to observe the growth of spring blossoms and the insect tribes, than to be out of hearing of ubiquitous Miss Dent.

There, to her surprise, Caleb introduced the very subject occupying her own thoughts.

"I'm glad to see you out in the open air, my dear. You keep too much indoors, and, as Miss Dent says, 'exert yourself beyond your strength.'"

"Really, Miss Dent is very considerate," she remarked, with a note of irony which her father—then stooping to remove an earth-worm which had forced its way between the oyster-shells on the path—did not catch.

"Yes, Carry, you are right there—she *is very* considerate. She anticipates wants with a degree of forethought rarely seen at her age (she cannot be more than thirty-one or two); she has certainly made me feel the loss of your poor dear mother much less than I had anticipated. A most invaluable acquisition she has been."

Not a favourable moment this for Caroline to broach the question of removal; but she did.

"Perhaps so, father; but considering the retired life we lead, I think a housekeeper is quite a superfluity, and I am sure I am able to manage by myself, and to make you just as comfortable."

He raised his head in amazement.

"You!—manage by yourself! You! a girl of seventeen, think yourself able to fill your experienced mother's shoes! The thing is preposterous! But, as Miss Dent observed the other day, experience only comes with years, and we must not expect to find old heads on young shoulders."

"I do not expect to fill my dear mother's place efficiently," she answered, put on her mettle by Miss Dent's condescending consideration. "But I do think the daughter she has reared more likely to tread in her footsteps than any stranger, even clever Miss Dent."

There was *no mistaking* her tone now, even if the falling

leaves of the primrose she was plucking to pieces had not arrested his attention.

"Carry, my child, what is this? Surely you are not jealous of good Miss Dent, who has been like an angel in the house through so many months of sickness and mourning. Your mother knew her worth; and, considering how devoted she was to you in illness, this desire to dispense with her services is sheer ingratitude."

"I am not ungrateful, father, nor am I jealous; but I think a housekeeper only adds to expense, which——"

"My dear, do not let that trouble you. That is my concern. But I am sorry to see you do not appreciate Miss Dent. Indeed, I wish you had expressed your distaste earlier," said he, with some annoyance on his face, as he led her into the grotto out of the keen March winds.

"Why earlier?" she asked, anxiously.

"Because, my dear, while thinking to do you a service, I fear I have unwittingly run counter to your wishes. The half-year for which I engaged Miss Dent as housekeeper, in the first instance, expired last Tuesday, and, having heard her remark casually that you would be all the better for a good blow at the seaside" (Caroline looked up suddenly; here was another of Miss Dent's suggestions), "I thought I could not do better than secure her services for another half, so as to give you an opportunity to spend the summer at Southport or Blackpool."

"What! And leave you and William at home?" she exclaimed, again raising her head, which had been sunk in depression on her hand, her elbow having found a rest on the small rustic table.

"Oh, no. We fancied he stood in need of sea-air as much as yourself," responded Mr. Booth, briskly, changing his tone to gravity, if not displeasure, as he added, "I am sorry, Caroline, that you fail to appreciate *my* arrangements for your welfare quite as much as you do the past services of Miss Dent."

Tears stood in Caroline's eyes.

"Indeed I am not ungrateful, whatever you may suppose. You are one of the kindest and very best of fathers"—and here her arm stole round his neck; "but I do think I might at least have been asked if Miss Dent's presence was agreeable to *me*."

"My child"—and he opened his eyes in wonderment—"I took that for granted!"

And so he had done. In the unsuspiciousness of his nature, he had fallen in with Miss Dent's plans, and fancied she must *stand* as high in the estimation of others as of himself. And in *his arrangements* he had thought only of giving his beloved

daughter a pleasant surprise; nothing of Miss Dent's ulterior motives.

All that could be done now was for Caroline to veil her chagrin, and make the best of the position. Her negative antipathy to the underhand housekeeper had become positive during that conversation with her father in the grotto; and she resolved, as far as possible, to prevent further encroachments or subversion of old usages.

Caroline was not aware that Miss Dent had found it convenient to lay Jane under an obligation by gathering a salad for supper in the cook's stead. The beds of lettuce, endive, cress, mustard, chives, &c., lay in the rear of the grotto, and were—thanks to friendly currant bushes—not visible from the house; so Miss Dent, by the aid of an ingenious contrivance of Daniel's, managed to acquaint herself with the sentiments of father and daughter, so far as they were developed in that private conference.

Notwithstanding the prospect of leaving so able a substitute behind her, Caroline was too suspicious of Miss Dent's influence over her father to fall in very readily with the seaside scheme. But Dr. Ashcroft having assured her that it was most essential William should have the benefit of the seaside air, and a long course of warm sea-baths, to strengthen his limbs, and check the painful swelling of his knee, she began to make her preparations; and the summer found them both lodging on the Southport esplanade; not enjoying themselves after the manner of ordinary watering-place visitors, with spasms of pleasure and lapses of ennui, but, after a quiet humdrum way of their own, extracting health from the breezes and amusement from the circulating library and the sands.

Sometimes Mr. Booth joined them on the Saturday, returning on the Monday for business; now and then he made a longer stay, but on such occasions he drove the phaeton over, and then there were pleasant excursions into the country in search of specimens of *Coleoptera* and *Lepidoptera*, or along the sand to dig for univalves and bivalves, on a chance of finding a rarity not in his cabinet.

Once Caroline ventured to ask how he could be spared from business, and was little pleased to hear that Mr. Dent had been appointed manager, at a liberal salary, and that his presence at the works was all-sufficient.

Still less was she pleased when, towards the end of the summer, Miss Dent accompained Mr. Booth on one of those longer visits; but her reception was not so warm as to induce a repetition of the experiment.

Once settled at the seaside, Caroline was loth to leave it. It was easy to surmise that she was not missed at home, and standing on the shore to watch the incoming tide, she felt herself nearer to Frederick. The very waves seemed to whisper messages from him, and the winds were charged with answers back. Then she and William could talk of him unchecked, save by the melancholy born of reminiscence and unfed hope.

Her answer to Frederick's cherished letter had been written as soon as she was equal to the effort; but though spring had rounded into summer, and the summer lapsed into autumn, nothing more had been heard of him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JIM-O'-TH'-BRUCK.

SHORTLY after Sophia Marsden returned home from Leigh, she was amused, and at the same time puzzled, by a question Jim-o'-th'-Bruck put to her one morning, as he was preparing the ground for the reception of onion and lettuce seed.

Resting on his spade, he looked up into her face with a serious and troubled expression on his own, and asked, gravely—

"Miss Marsden, con yo tell me heaw aw mun kep witches and boggarts eawt o' th' stable?"

"What did you say?" she inquired, hardly able to trust her ears, or keep down the risibility which twitched at every muscle of her mobile countenance.

He repeated his question. Like a Quaker she answered it with another—

"Why do you want to know, Jim?"

"Well, miss," and he pushed his cap aside, the better to scratch his rough head, as if by so doing he aroused his slumbering wits, "aw'm sorely puzzlet. Fur more nor three months back owther Smoiler or Bess hes bin o' in a lather when aw've oppendt th' stable dur on a Friday mearn. An th' poor beast tremblet an' bin as toired as if it hed been ridden by awd Scrat himsel."

Sophia had much ado to preserve a grave face, but as the man went on in sober sadness, and had little of romance in his composition, her quick wits were set to work.

"Do you lock the stable door every night?" she questioned.

The man evidently thought such a question superfluous.

"Eh? Lock it? Aw should think aw did! What wouldn mester say if owt happent them beastes through moi leavin' th' stable dur oppen, aw shouldn loike to knaw?"

"What do you do with the key in the daytime?"

"Whoi, just heng it o' th' nail inside th' stable dur."

"Oh!"

"Ay, but it's i' th' neet-toime, when th' dur's fast locked, an aw've th' key awhoam, that th' beastes are sarved like thatn; an' aw fund 'em o' i' a swat an' th yure torned as if aw'd nivvor put a curry-comb on a limb or flank. Moi gron'feyther usen't to say *as heaw th' witches* rode horses to deeath; an' he tellt me

allus t' hev a horse-shoe nailt on th' stable dur t' keep th' witches and boggarts eawt. But lor, miss, aw've three horse-shoes nailt o' that dur, an' they havna kept th' witches eawt! What mun aw do?"

Sophia smiled at the man's earnestness.

"Have you mentioned it to your master?"

"Eh? What? Noa; aw'm noan sich a fooil as thatn. He'd swear aw'd bin doin' it mysen, an' spoil th' horsewhip o' mi shouthers."

"Have you named it to Mr. Thomas?"

"Eh! Miss Sophy, yo' moight think aw wur daft. A'd raythor tell th' owd chap than him, by hauf."

"Well, Jim, I've not much experience of witches myself, but I know some one learned in such matters, and if you will tell me the next time you find either Bess or Smiler in so sad a plight, I will do my best to discover a charm more powerful than a horse-shoe," said Sophia, with as much gravity as she could assume. "But, mind, you must be very careful not to name the matter to anyone, or to repeat this conversation, lest it should prevent the charm from working."

Jim promised readily enough; and Sophia, leaving him to his digging, turned into the house, murmuring to herself—

"This is some of Master Tom's witchcraft, or my name's not Sophia. What fresh mischief is the Ogre up to now?"

Emma was unusually wakeful on Thursday night, and Sophia had no chance of slipping from their room unperceived; but her quick ears were on the alert, and she fancied she heard the landing window open and close, but could not be certain.

The very next day, Jim, with a long lugubrious face, bestowed his confidence upon her again.

"Miss Sophy, dun yo' know th' brown mear wur o' i' a swat agen when aw oppent th' stable dur at six o'clock this mearn, an wur o' covert wi slutch an' foam! Aw'm fair beside mysen ower it."

Sophia considered. Then, with as much seriousness as she could muster, said—

"I have been told that a sprig of mountain ash, tied overhead in the horse's stall, is a protection from witchcraft; or that a red thread tied across the stable door will keep evil spirits out. You had better try them. Of course I do not vouch for their efficacy. I have quelled an evil spirit before to-day; but never a witch."

Jim was profuse in his thanks, taking her figurative speech literally; and a week later watched for an opportunity to tell

her, in high glee, that the double charm had been all-potent. Neither witch nor warlock had bestridden his equine charge whilst red thread and rowan twigs kept guard.

Nor had Sophia, on the watch though she was, heard door or window move.

But Tom had been in the gig to Bolton that week, in lieu of his father, and did not return until late, and, she argued, "perhaps was too fatigued for further exercise."

The charm must have been effectual, Jim-o'-th'-Bruck brightened up so marvellously.

Then followed Emma's elopement. In the hubbub and trouble that event occasioned, minor matters were forgotten; to say nothing of Sophia's concentration of thought on her own affairs and those of her reverend lover, whose frequent visits began to attract Simeon Marsden's attention, and to provoke black looks.

Not that he suspected Sophia of any penchant for the tall serious person in black, or the gentleman in the white neckcloth of any hankering after Sophia's affections. He only regarded the curate as a vigilant shepherd of souls, seeking to recall stray lambs and sheep to the fold of the Establishment, and, as a devout Dissenter, felt bound to discountenance his approaches.

Fain would Mr. Hay have explained his pretensions to the uncivil old cotton-spinner, whose motives he thoroughly misunderstood, had not Sophia counselled delay. She was desirous to be armed with her aunt's legacy before hazarding a battle.

He had delayed so long and so unnecessarily, that now he was all impatience. He had been afraid of Sophia's verdict. He was not afraid of any man, even though that man was Sophia's father.

Meanwhile that old and unmanageable father was being managed by Tom, who kept Ralph Hyde's dead and buried body dangling before him (with a suggestiveness of pains and penalties anything but refreshing to a nervous man) whensoever that amiable son wanted his purse replenished; which was much more frequently than the father considered at all essential.

Moreover, Tom was bent on becoming a partner in the cotton-mill. The suggestion had come in the first instance from Daniel Dent, who, in that interview in Caleb Booth's counting-house, after the disappearance of Frederick, had purposely recognised in Mr. Thomas the junior member of a flourishing firm.

Thomas had never been ambitious to have a fixed salary; that would have implied fixed hours of labour and settled duties. Besides, he extracted more cash from his father's pockets by squeezing them at favourable junctures than he would have been willing to hand over as a stipulated payment.

Latterly, his expenses had increased considerably, and his father hesitated to supply demands which had no apparent foundation. This did not suit the son; and, taking his cue from that rising man, Daniel Dent, he kept the iron red-hot on the anvil whilst he beat and shaped it into a partnership.

Daniel Dent had met him in the course of business now and then, and once the Flaming Castle had received the temperate drinker of tea and the dyspeptic applicant for peppermint cordial at the same time, when it is possible the twain strengthened each other's hands.

At all events, Tom Marsden began to accompany his father to Liverpool, Manchester, and Bolton, either for the purchase of cotton or the sale of yarn; and, in order to show his eminent fitness for business and hitherto unappreciated value, undertook to conduct their Bolton trade himself; and, it must be conceded, acquitted himself to Simeon Marsden's satisfaction.

The latter thereupon gave orders for Mr. Chorley to draught out a deed of partnership.

But Tom and he haggled about terms, and came to loggerheads.

Then Mr. Marsden took the reins entirely in his own hands. There was no more driving to Bolton twice a week for the partner-expectant, and Sophia declared that the Ogre cracked his knuckles until he made her almost as fidgetty as himself.

The March winds, however, paid no more respect to Simeon Marsden than they did to Jim-o'-th'-Bruck, but to the former they brought (or he thought they brought, which in his case was pretty much the same thing) twinge after twinge of rheumatism, and he had recourse to Dr. Taylor's red bottle, applied externally, and Blair's gout and rheumatic pills applied internally, with no visible effect.

The members of his class assembled in the unpapered, uncarpeted drawing-room—used only on such occasions—to put up special prayers for their afflicted brother; but the unused chimney smoked rebelliously, then in these petitions an unlucky brother trod upon some tender spiritual corn; and after their departure the pious class-member stamped and swore with rage, first at one, and then another of the family; every time a door or window was opened vowed they were in a conspiracy to kill him with smoke and draughts, and for once his affectionate son did not attempt either to soothe him or alleviate his sufferings.

It might be that Tom was in the dumps; it might be that it was part of his policy to let his father feel the need of a consoler; it might be that he thought his father was not ill enough; at

all events, the window opened to let out the smoke in the first instance was not so thoroughly closed by Tom as it might have been, and the candles flared in the current of air. Old Marsden did not grumble entirely without cause.

If calculating Tom had reckoned upon his father feeling too rheumatic to brave the wind on the morrow, and once more having recourse to him as a deputy, he reckoned without his host.

When Jim-o'-th'-Bruck had Smiler between the shafts, Simeon Marsden, great-coated and muffled up to the chin, was ready to take his seat in the gig (after the heavy hood had been pulled up to shelter him), determined to show he was able to dispense with his extortionate son's services.

But that March was a lion to the last, and roared its savagest in the red face of the big cotton-spinner all the way between Tyldesley and Bolton. To counteract the cutting wind, he took a glass of brandy hot at every roadside inn, so that by the time he reached his destination, between his temper, and the fiery spirit, and the rheumatism, he was not in the best frame for business.

As a natural consequence he did little, and that little was not satisfactory.

He came home, buffeted by the wind, buffeted by the consciousness that he had not shown himself as keen a business man as Tom, and troubled by his isolation from the only member of the family who could feel for him when racked with pain, or worried by some unprofitable speculation, or the fluctuations of the cotton-market.

He was groaning by a kitchen-fire whilst Mrs. Marsden rubbed his big, aching shoulders with his favourite embrocation until her own hands tingled, when Tom shambled in, and, contrary to expectation, came forward, saying—

"I fear you are very bad, father; the wind was very keen to-day. I felt it cut me through like a knife. Here, mother, give me the red-bottle; I can rub him better than you."

"Thank you, Tom, lad; that's something like! Thy mother's no notion of rubbing one."

Tom was re-installed.

Straightway he set the house in motion for the coddling of the invalid—half of whose pain was imaginary.

The next morning fresh instructions were given to Mr. Chorley, in which due regard was paid to Tom's modest stipulations. He had managed matters to *his* satisfaction.

And that morning Jim-o'-th'-Bruck coming into the house with broccoli for dinner, looking round to see that there were no listeners, whispered to Miss Marsden, with a very troubled face.

"Eh, miss, dun yo know, them witches rode Brown Bess agen last night, an' th' pooir beast's cast a shoe an' fa'en leame! Charm's noan a bit o' good!"

"Um," murmured Sophia, assentingly, "I thought *I* heard witches in the wind last night."

"Ay, an' th' warst on it is, mester's ba'and* to know neaw," said he, fully believing that Miss Marsden shared his faith in witchcraft.

"What's thatn mester's ba'and to know?" asked Ann, coming into the kitchen with eggs and milk for a pudding.

Jim-o'-th'-Bruck was quick at evasion.

"Whoi, mester's ba'and to foind Miss Emma, as was. Fur, as we druv threaw Bowton yesterday, aw seed a bran new soign ower a draper's shop, an' Job Hoindley wur painted on it as large as loife;" and he looked askance at Miss Marsden to watch the effect of his revelation.

Sophia sank on the chair in amazement.

Ann, sharp as himself, took him up smartly.

"Weel, what o' that? Job Hoindleys are as thick i' Lanky-sheer as caterpillars on cabbages, an' drapers' shops are noan so scarce thah needs tell that as news."

"Eh! but, Nan"—and he nodded on one side sagaciously—"Miss Emma as was, as is Mrs. Hoindley neaw, stood at th' dur bout a bonnet. An' hoo torned reawnd an' went in th' shop when hoo' clapped eyes on th' gig. What dun yo' mak' o' that?"

"What sort of a shop?" asked Sophia, whose pride was a little touched. The curate might not care to have a sister-in-law behind the counter of a third-rate draper's shop.

"Whoy, a linendraper's, to be sure."

"Yes, yes—I understand that. But what class? Was it respectable?" she put, somewhat impatiently.

"Oh, hoigh! 'Twur a toidyish gradely† soort o' shop. Aw dunnot know heaw Job Hoindley fund th' brass to start a bizness fur hissen. He wur nowt but a shopman, and his feyther left him nowt, as aw ivor heeard on."

Sophia retired from the kitchen, not too well pleased to hear the circumstances of her now brother-in-law so freely discussed, though the same proposition puzzled her—"Where did Job Hindley get the money?"

And no sooner was she gone than Jim was ignominiously expelled by Ann for meddling his head and chattering about the affairs of his betters.

*Bound, obliged. †Gradely—proper.

CHAPTER XXV.

LANCASHIRE WITCHES.

Sophia carried Jim's information direct to her mother, between whom and herself there existed that bond of sympathetic communion which ever should link together mother and child.

She found her upstairs, putting away clean linen in the press.

"Mother, what do you think Jim has told me?" she began; and went on to answer her own exclamatory question. "He says he saw our Emma at the door of a shop in Bolton without her bonnet, and that 'Job Hindley' was painted on the sign."

Mrs. Marsden's back had been towards Sophia. She turned, bringing her neatly-quilled cap-border full in view, as well as her astonished face, and clasped hands.

"You don't say so!" was all her exclamation; but her tone conveyed as much of surprise and bewilderment as could have been spread over an elaborate sentence. "You don't say so!" she repeated.

"No; but Jim does!" answered Sophia, promptly. "What do you think of the news?"

The burden of the intelligence had borne Mrs. Marsden to the nearest chair.

"Well, my dear," she gasped, "I have scarcely had time to think. But one thing is clear (if Jim speaks truth), Emma cannot have done so badly as we thought."

"Oh, mother—a shopkeeper!"

"My child, you forget that she left us to run off with a mere draper's assistant. The shopkeeper is certainly a stage higher. But where that young man can have got the money to establish a business passes my comprehension! He cannot be thirty years of age; and if he has saved up even part of the requisite funds, and obtained credit for the remainder of his stock, he must have been prudent and careful, as well as industrious—one of the men who get on in the world. Of course they have begun in a very small way?"

Answering the query with which Mrs. Marsden concluded her speech, so like in its tone to Jim's own problem, Sophia said—

"Jim did not seem to think it a small shop at all. And he too, wondered where the money came from; so do I."

But conjecture failed to solve the enigma. As a member of

Ebenezer congregation, Tyldesley born, Job Hindley and his antecedents were well known. His parentage, though respectable, was humble, and there was no likelihood that his father left more than buried him.

A solution came from an unlikely quarter.

When Sophia went back to the kitchen to lay the cloth, she found Ann moving about in a sort of dreamy haze, very unlike her ordinary clear-headed, sharp-footed manner; and dinner threatened to be behind time.

However, it was ready within ten minutes, and the two masculine Marsdens, happening to be in a particularly amicable mood, those ten minutes for a marvel did not provoke a tempest.

Dinner was eaten and the tables cleared; father and son went back to the factory arm-in-arm; Mrs. Marsden retired to the parlour sofa for her afternoon nap, and Sophia was about to retreat to indite a billet to her dearly-beloved John, when a word from Ann, whose dream seemed unbroken, arrested the young lady's steps.

"Miss Sophy," said she, "did yo ever foind that tisher-papper yo lost?"

"No, Ann. Why do you ask?"

"Becoase," and Ann came and leaned her arms on the unpainted deal dining-table in front of Sophia, the better to look her full in the face, "becoase aw thenk aw couldn happen to tell wheere it went, if aw wur well whipt for it," and she nodded her head two or three times significantly.

So mysterious she looked that Sophia opened her eyes in very bewilderment.

"It's moi firm belief, an' nowt'll mak me think owt else, them bank noates nivor wur brunt!"

"Not burnt! Ann?"

"Noa! Not brunt! An' Miss Emma's brunt fingers wur o' a sham. It's moi sattled conviction that when hoo sheawted eawt an' said her fingers wur brunt, hoo'd just raked them hidden bank noates eawt o' th' o'en top, an' when aw axed what hoo sheawted fur, hoo said as heaw hoo'd brunt her fingers, nobbut to keep me i' th' dark, an' aw'd tak' moi Bible ooath that it wur a downreet lee. The o'en weren't hot enough to brun her, or the pappers oather, afore oi fettled th' foire, an' when hoo ran fur rag to wrap her fingers in it wur nobbut an excuse to fotch yon white tisher-papper to be brunt insteead o' the bank noates. Theere!" And having delivered herself of this pent-up flood, *Ann* waited until the astonishment which had kept Sophia silent *should find* utterance.

A new light, which carried conviction with it, had dawned on Sophia as the woman spoke.

"How long have you imagined this?" she asked at length.

"Well, it flashed ower me loike that deay yo' wur gettin' up them parson's things, when yo' couldna fand that tisher-papper, an' yo' said'n as heaw yo' hed seen th' papper th' varry noight as Miss Booth cam here! It just flashed ower moi moind as th' goose wur cooked next deay!"

"Yes! a Michaelmas goose, to be sure—so it was!" recollected Sophia, adding, with involuntary haste—

"But what would Emma do with them?"

Ann smiled at her utter simplicity.

"Do wi' em! Didna she mak' a soight o' foine weddin' clooas? An' hanna they sot oop a dreaper's shop wi' t' rest?"

Sophia was petrified. Quick-witted as she was, the natural acuteness of this uneducated servant-woman had pierced a mystery neither she nor one in the family could fathom.

But who could have suspected so much adroit duplicity from Emma—quiet, stolid, apathetic, pious Emma? That it was true, Sophia never doubted for one instant.

She was not of a fainting nature, but she went so sick, Ann, seeing her change of colour, ran for a glass of water. Twice in one morning her eyes had been opened to the underhand dealings of her own kith and kin, and she felt overpowered.

"Luk yo, miss," said good-natured Ann, when she came back with the water, "aw've kept this o' to mysen o' alung for fear o' doin' that as aw couldna undo; and dunna yo go an' let eawt owt abeawt it. Yo'd nobbut mak mischief! Yo see, if hoo hadna raked eawt th' o'en, th' bank noates would ha bin brunt sure as eggs is eggs, just as th' tisher-papper wur, an' if yo'r feyther did lose 'em it nobbut sarved him reet! An' aw canna help saying so if aw wur to dee for it."

"Hush, Ann!" interposed Sophia, with some dignity. "You have no right to say so."

"Oh, plenty o' folk beside me both say an' dun what theyn no reet!" and Ann's head went up with an indignant toss, as she put herself in the way of Sophia, who, with a dubious expression of countenance, was about to quit the kitchen once more.

"Neaw luk ye, Miss Sophy; if yo' tell misses, you'll nobbut set her frettin'. Hoo's sure and sartin to co' it stealin'—an' happen it might be; folks have different notions. Aw've not made moi moind up abeawt it yet. Happen her an' Mester Hindley'll mak a *better use* on 'em than Mester Marsden. An'

aw'd not loike to be hard on th' young folk, an' bring trouble on em', fur o' she wur so fause and sly."

Sophia promised to "think about it."

And in the solitude of her own room she did "think about it."

There was no doubt that the removal of the hidden bank notes, and their conversion to her own purposes, was absolute and deliberate theft; but it was possible that Emma saw it in another light: that she, with her peculiar views of religion, would not regard their discovery as a special temptation to be resisted, but as a special Providence to be made the most of, and accepted with thanksgiving.

The subject had many phases, and the more Sophia mused and pondered, the more complex and involved became her thoughts; and when at last she went downstairs at tea-time, with a slightly feverish cheek, her letter to the Rev. John was unwritten, and she had arrived only at Ann's conclusion—that it would be a pity to burden her mother with a secret and a problem which so worried herself.

The sight of Tom, as he came in with his father from the factory (a sort of living crutch for the other's rheumatic limbs), and tenderly assisted the stiff joints to adapt themselves to the angles of chair and footstool—the sight of him thus employed recalled Jim's other communication, and again set her brain at work and her tongue tingling to strip off *his* mask at once. She knew nothing of the projected partnership, but she did know that Tom never gave even a show of affection away for nothing.

She half expected some mention of the Hindleys from one or other, perhaps in a violent outburst from the padded chair, and reserved her bullets for Tom as a countercharge. But nothing was said to disturb the peace, beyond sudden starts and groans, anathemas against diseases and doctors, with grumblings at the comestibles and condiments, and that was too common to excite more than passing attention.

She began to waver in her mind, when her father broke the water into rippling eddies by the inadvertent cast of a very small pebble.

"I say, Tom, didst thah hear about Brown Bess?"

Sophia, seated opposite to Tom, looked him keenly in the face.

He had his cup to his lips, and either his tea went down the wrong way, or a crumb got into the windpipe, or Sophia's gaze disconcerted him, he went so red in the face, and choked, and spluttered, and coughed so violently.

"Slap him on the back," the old man cried out to Ann, who

stood near—an order Ann obeyed with a vigorous energy Tom could well have dispensed with.

She cured his cough, if not his red face.

Then Mr. Marsden repeated his inquiry.

"What about Bess?" coughed out the son, as if he had hardly recovered himself.

"Lost a hind shoe and gone lame, Jim says," was the reply.

"Indeed! How's that, father?" asked Tom, from whose face Sophia never once took her eyes.

"Perhaps on the Bolton Road, father," edged in Sophia, not removing her eyes, though their expression changed.

She saw that her arrow, feathered by a guess, had gone home, and that was enough for her.

"How could that be, lass? We had Smiler in harness yesterday."

"Oh! it was not *Bess* that went to Bolton, then!" she repeated, as if ruminating.

"What does Jim say?" questioned Tom.

"Jim!" said Simeon, with infinite contempt; "he tells a long cock-and-bull story of witches riding the mare. I told him it was much more like himself on some rogue's business or other, an' be hanged to him! If it hadna been for this rheumatism I'd have broke my stick about his confounded shoulders! To talk to me about witches!" and the speaker's indignation rose.

"Well," said Sophia, "I think you are right. *Whoever* lamed the poor creature with over-riding at midnight did it in secret, and *must* have gone on a *rogue's* errand, and he does dese rvea good stick to his back. What do you think, Tom?" she added, appealing to him dryly, with a covert meaning in her glance.

He gave her one vicious look, as if he could have annihilated her on the spot.

Ann, who had an amazing fund of superstition, had caught the word "witches," and very unexpectedly came to his relief, as he was attempting to fix the onus on innocent Jim.

"Eh, mester, dunno yo' fleer at witches. It is na safe, and on a Friday too. Moi gron'feyther wur a farmer at Bullock-smithy, an' there wur an owd witch as they ducked i' th' horse-pond fur riding a mare o' his'n till it cast its foal. An' th' owd witch spat on him an' gi'e him a look wi' her evil e'e, and he nivor did a bit moore good; an' that day three year fell from an apple-tree an' wur kilt. It's th' witches, mester; awm sure it's th' witches! Jim ne'er did nowt as wasna jannock."

Ann, it may be told, had a sort of sneaking regard for shock-headed Jim-o'-th'-Bruck.

She had spoken with much earnestness at first; but dropped her voice to a sort of shuddered whisper, well calculated to affect a nervous, superstitious coward or an ill-balanced mind; and Mr. Marsden, grasping the arm of his chair, looked round him uncomfortably.

It suited Tom to fall in with Ann's views by admitting the *possibility* of such fearful beings, quoting Scripture, and referring especially to the Witch of Endor in support of the theory, and, as he did so, cast a threatening glance at Sophia, to which she replied with a comical smile.

Mr. Marsden entered into a discussion of the broad question of witchcraft and popular beliefs on the subject, artfully led by Tom so as not to shake his scepticism, but to drift from the starting-point—the lame mare.

Sophia brought it back by saying—

"Pooh! who believes in witchcraft in these enlightened days? I believe there are men worse than the worst witches ever Lancashire held. Poor Bess has been lamed by an evil spirit incarnate, and I'd not rest till I found him out, were I you, father."

"D'ye think so, lass?"

Tom glared at her; but she went on—

"Yes, I do; and witches or no witches, if I were you, father, I would have a fresh lock put on the stable-door—a patent lock—and, above all, be sure to keep the key myself, so that no one could get its fellow. I think *that* would be the best cure for witchcraft. Spells and charms don't answer—Jim tried those long ago, as I know," and Sophia moved her chair, as having said her say.

Her remark struck old Marsden, who did not care to admit the witches in any way. He graciously assented.

"That's the wisest thing thah's said this month, lass. I'll tak' a woman's advice for once. Better pay for a lock than lose my horses. I'll get one in Manchester on Tuesday."

Tom caught Sophia by the arm as she was on her way to bed that night, and whispered to her savagely—

"I know not what witch you are in league with; but, by heaven, if I catch you playing the spy upon me again, or you dare utter a syllable of what you know already, I'll be the death of you—if I strangle you with my own hands!"

Sophia's heart beat a little at his threat, knowing his capacity for evil: but she drew herself up proudly.

"I shall do my duty whatsoever that may be; and if you *hang yourself* with your own rope, don't blame me. I am not

likely to track a brother to destruction, however bad he may be. But I tell you, Tom, your own sins will surely find you out one of these days without any aid of mine."

Ay, and there was an unsuspected spy on his track, more subtle and purposeful than his sister—one whose spur was of his own fashioning.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FARM ON THE MOOR.

This time the deed of partnership was signed, sealed, and duly gazetted before Simeon Marsden had leisure to change his mind, and rheumatism—still gambolling like spiteful elves over his big body, in spite of Blair's pills and the Oldfield-lane doctor's red-bottle—drove him to Buxton in search of ease, and a certain buxom widow, who had lodgings for invalid gentlemen with ample means, whom Simeon Marsden knew of old.

So he made the journey alone, and left Tom in charge; and, having his own interest at stake, the junior partner was doubly vigilant. Not a hand upon the place, from the spinner of the finest counts to the youngest scavenger or piecer, was allowed to shirk or idle now.

He also found time to mingle pleasure with his business, and one or the other called him to Bolton more than once a week.

On these occasions he dispensed with Jim's services, set him to work in the garden, and took the reins himself.

We can occupy Jim's vacant cushion, and accompany Tom to his journey's end on one of these business trips.

Up Cinder Hill easily to Chowbent, and then along the turnpike road he drove rapidly, cracking the whip instead of his knuckles, and, with its long lash, flicking from the hedgerows the white blossoms of the sloe and the tender green sprouts of the thorn, or the immature leaflets from overarching ash and elm, as if the destruction of their early promise was a joy to him; but if the titlark sang aloud, and the shivering notes of the willow-wren seemed to follow him, there was no music in his soul to rejoice in their company.

Rain had fallen freely during the night, but the sun shone brightly when he left home, and when an April shower pelted at him, to check his onslaught on bud and blossom, he buttoned up a waterproof as impenetrable as himself, and never unfastened it—though the sunbeams pressed him to do so—until he had wound his way through the muddy streets of the busy, bustling town, and threw the reins to the ostler at the Black Bull, with special charges anent the refreshment of Smiler.

Without removing his loose, shiny waterproof, though he

opened it sufficiently at the throat to reveal a more fashionable scarf and breastpin than he had been wont to wear, he took his way first to manufacturers of heavy goods and sheetings, then to weavers of shirtings and long-cloth, and having felt their trade pulses, produced his samples, and took orders or effected sales much more quickly and adroitly than his blustering father.

Stopping neither for luncheon nor for dinner, back he went to the Black Bull. His business over, he took a biscuit and a glass of bitter beer standing at the bar, and then, the gig being at the door, hurried away, not on the road homeward, but westward, out of the town, along the Chorley-road, skirting the moor, past the villages of Harwich and Anderton, across the bridge which spans the infant river Douglas, then, turning sharp off at Rivington-lane, again crossed the stream, leaving the old church behind, and taking a sharper turn along an unfrequented bye-road, reached a solitary farm-house, which stood on land reclaimed from the moor, and which looked as though the reclamation had been a cheering process.

The farm-house, an overgrown cottage, was long, low, and straggling, thatched with straw, and had once been coloured a lively buff, but time and weather had washed *their* artistic colour-brushes over it, and left scarcely a trace of the staring ochre. A porch, with hospitable stone seats for wayfarers, sheltered the principal entrance from the blasts, which in rough weather drove across the moor—a protection all the more necessary, as the door opened directly into the great kitchen or living-room. Here, however, another barrier was placed against the wind in the shape of a high oaken partition, or spear, which projected some ten feet inwards from the door, and formed the back of a long wooden seat.

The house had been built of unhewn stones, with little help from the mason; and the fireplace, which confronted the spear, owed as little to the ironmonger. A huge crane held a large porridge-pot, there was a good earthen oven for bakery, and from the rafters above the hearth hung a cratch, or rack, for oatcakes. Between the fireside wall and the spear ran a long transome window, which must have rejoiced at the repeal of the window-tax, and over its leaded diamond panes rose and honeysuckle were making their way outside, at the invitation of spring.

A large dresser and plate-shelf, well stocked with willow-patterned ware, borrowed a glory from the far-off window opposite, under which was an old-fashioned "squab" sofa, covered with blue and white check. A short frill or valance of

the same crossed the top of the window, and an easy chair near the fire, which looked cosy enough for an old grandmother to knit or doze in, was covered with the same primitive pattern. Near this chair was a round three-legged table, and farther away on the earthern floor rested another table, large and long, also of deal, and white as good scrubbing could make it.

There were no fewer than four other doors—one near the plate-shelf to a secondary kitchen, through which passed the traffic of the farm; a staircase door; one to a long dark passage, and another, concealed by the spear, to a sort of parlour, where hard, hair-seated, bay-wood chairs and sofa matched a table covered with oilcloth, and looked so respectably cold, not even the brass fender, the brass candlesticks on the mantel-shelf, the square of carpet and the rag hearth-rug, could warm it up.

Before Smiler stopped of his own accord at the little wooden gate, which was separated from the house by some twenty yards of well-cultivated garden ground, a young woman, gaily dressed, ran down the paved path to welcome the new-comer.

She was fair and pretty, but looked slightly worn, as if with some latent anxiety.

It was our old acquaintance, Nelly Scholes, but on the fourth finger of her left hand was a wedding-ring, as, judging from appearances, there had need to be.

She wore a dress of striped silk, trimmed with lace around neck and sleeves; a chain, from which dangled a locket, shone resplendent over her full bust; bracelets spanned her wrist, rings sparkled on her fingers, and in her ears; only her bright fair hair was natural and unadorned.

"Oh, Tom, aw'm so glad yo've come. Dinner's bin waitin' this hauve hour, an' it is *so* lonesome here 'bout yo."

"Now, then, don't begin to grumble first thing," was courteous Tom's reply. "I'm here as soon as I could be. And I'm hungry as a hunter, for I never got even a lunch to be here in time, and you grumble first start. Hallo, you, Giles! Where are you?"

Giles, a lad with a white head and a red face, came at a run from a shippon on the left to take Smiler out of the shafts; and then, and not till then, did Mr. Tom stoop down to receive the caresses Mrs. Tom Marsden (I suppose we must call her Mrs. Tom Marsden) had been waiting to bestow.

With his whip in one hand and the other on her shoulder, he accompanied her to the porch, where he bent down to give her a kiss, whereupon she brightened considerably, and they entered the house like "a comfortable couple."

Mrs. Fernhead, the farmer's wife, met them at the best parlour door with a word of welcome for the gentleman.

"Eh, Mester Tummas, aw'm fain fur si' thi', yo'r good leddy taks on so when yo'r a bit late, an' aw tell her she'll spoil her roses. But aw'm feart th' trout Giles caught this mornin' will be spoilt too wi' waiting, an' th' ducklin's 'll be frizzlet up to nowt."

The good dame bustled about, put the fish before her lodgers, and left them to its enjoyment; but she had almost spoilt that by an incautious word.

"Look you, Nelly; if you don't drop that fretting when I'm half-an-hour or an hour late, I'll just drop coming, and see if you'll like that any better."

Half frightened, she left her seat, put her arms round his neck, put her pretty face against his (for all the world like a wolf and a lamb), and promised not to do so again; but tears were full in their fountains, and, in spite of her will, the harsh threat set them rolling down her cheeks on to his.

After a little more angry demonstration on his part, he allowed himself to be mollified, and she sat down to her dinner, her appetite (always dainty now) quite gone.

That exercise of his manly power, however, served as sauce for his trout, and he despatched fish and fowl with more than ordinary gusto. When the bones of the savoury ducklings were removed to make way for a custard, and the bare walls of that went away with the cloth, he bade Nelly put glasses on the table whilst he went to the gig outside for a bottle of whiskey (brought from another inn, not the Black Bull), and then proceeded to make merry to his heart's content, inviting her to partake, as she sat cuddling close to him on the hard sofa—as any young wife might who only saw her husband for a few hours once or twice a week.

For conversation, there was the wonderful play she had seen at the Bolton Theatre (the very night Bess lost a shoe), and the steep hill to the theatre, which it had tired her so very much to mount; and the fear she had had lest she and Mrs. Fernhead, who had driven her over in the spring cart, should have to go back without seeing him; and her great joy when he joined them in the box to which the man had shown them; and the wonder what time he got home, he left Rivington so late.

And then there was his new partnership to be paraded before her, with many lofty airs; and then he had to find fresh excuses why she should be content to remain in that lonely farmhouse, nstead of being taken to a home of their own.

And then she wanted to know if he would take her to South-

port again this summer, after—she did not say *what*, but added, "It wunna be lung first."

"That depends on circumstances, Nelly; most likely I may."

And Nelly, quite elate at the prospect, brought out a copy-book for a brief writing lesson, for which she was so grateful he ought to have felt every word of thanks a stab.

She had learned to read in a Sunday-school, but writing not being in the category of that educational system, she could neither communicate with him nor read any written message he might send, until recently, and that imperfectly.

But as she spoke of trying to improve, and make herself fit to associate with his sisters, so that he should not be ashamed to introduce his wife to his friends, he cracked his knuckles, and puckered his eyes and mouth with such an ogreish expression, it was well her head was bent over her copy, or the consequences might have been serious.

When Tom Marsden reached Tyldesley, somewhere about midnight, Jim was sitting up with Ann, waiting his advent, and the man, struck with the condition of the horse, puzzled and perplexed himself to account for Smiler being more done up with a simple journey to Bolton than if the master had driven him to Manchester and back. But, wiser from late experience, he held his peace, and said nothing about witches now; and Tom was not likely to reveal how many extra miles of road Smiler had dragged the lumbering gig over, or the rate at which he had been driven.

Simeon Marsden, in his anxiety to punish the wight who had lamed his brown mare, had, however, made no secret of "Jim's absurd notion of witch-riding," and it consequently reached the open ears of Rosa Bradshaw's occasional Sunday customer without drawing any opinion from his close lips; though, like Solomon Gills, he did not fail to "make a note of it."

"Mr. Dent, Caleb Booth's clerk, was here yesterday, inquiring for you, sir," said Minshull to Mr. Thomas Marsden, when he walked into the counting-house the next morning, earlier than usual.

"What was his business?"

"Did not say, sir."

"Did not he leave any message?"

"No, sir; only said he had seen the new partnership gazetted, and wished to congratulate you; that was all."

"What the hangment is my partnership to him, I should like to know?" muttered the new junior. "It's like his impertinence *to talk of congratulating* me, and to our clerk, too!"

"I should like to know what that clerk of Booth's did want?" he pondered in his own mind an hour or so later. "He's not the fellow to come here merely for idle compliment."

Tom Marsden knew quite soon enough what Daniel Dent wanted.

That model clerk made one of the Ebenezer congregation the following Sabbath, and contrived to place himself so as to be in full view of the model Christian during the service, and quite accidentally to bar his passage as he left the chapel.

Hat in hand, he bowed low, and made way for Mrs. Marsden and Miss Marsden to pass out before him; then following them down the aisle was ready to receive Mr. Thomas at the chapel door, with his hat on his head, and his hand extended in a sort of half-familiar, half-deferential manner.

He certainly felt himself rising in the social scale, his advances were so graduated.

But Tom himself had risen a step since last he saw Mr. Dent, and he took no notice of the proffered hand.

"Hang the fellow!" he thought. "He seems to forget that *I* am a master now, and hire such things as he."

But Daniel Dent did not forget it, and he would not forget the rejected hand either, albeit he appeared unconscious of the slight.

Uninvited, he walked beside Tom Marsden. Mrs Marsden, in her well-saved black satin dress, Canton shawl, and prim brown bonnet, and Miss Marsden, blooming in fresh colours like the spring, were in advance.

After a curt "Good morning," Tom, yielding to his natural stoop, walked on in silence; even his knuckles, encased in kid, refused response when he crushed them.

A man without a purpose might have been rebuffed—not so Daniel Dent.

He struck the key-note of conversation, and to a tune which made the wily hypocrite by his side a puppet, dancing almost as he piped.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THOU ART THE MAN."

DANIEL DENT did not fall back on the Englishman's password, the weather, but, as a wave in the stream of Ebenezerites flowing from the chapel's open portals, as was more natural, he took the sermon for his theme.

The minister—life is full of such coincidences—had chosen a text so pertinent to his purpose, he might have suggested it. Who knows? Perhaps he had!

"You are fortunate in having so powerful a preacher at Ebenezer," said Daniel. "It is not often one meets so eloquent a man in a country pulpit. I was unusually edified."

"It's more than I was," rose to the tip of Tom's surly tongue; but he remembered the crowd of listeners, and in his chapel-going drawl answered—"Yes; Mr. Fisher has the root of the matter in him; the members of his flock are much favoured."

"So I should think. He has an uncommon faculty both for denunciation and exhortation; and whether it was the unexpected eloquence of the pastor or the potency of his theme, I cannot tell, but I felt as if every time he thundered out 'Thou art the man!' he hammered a red-hot iron on the cold hard anvil of some conscience in his congregation. I felt my own tingle. How might you feel, sir?" and he turned his dull grey eyes on Tom's shifty ones, as if his inquiry was altogether common-place.

Mr. Tom was, however, on familiar ground. "Oh, we are all sinners, and Nathan's impeachment of David strikes home to most hearts, Mr. Dent. It is a favourite subject in Dissenting pulpits." Non-committal was Tom's policy.

"And are your ministers always so personal, Mr. Marsden? I make the inquiry as a Churchman, sir. It occurred to me that Mr. Fisher was especially personal—that he had either a special individual or an idea in his mind;" and again he looked askance at the chapel-goer at his side.

"I cannot tell what you mean, sir," answered Tom, coldly, anxious to put an end to the discourse, which was taking an unpleasant turn. "The natural depravity of man is sufficient basis——"

"I mean," interrupted the persistent clerk, "that possibly he *had some* actual fact or circumstance in his mind's eye when he

selected his text and arranged his homily; such, for instance"—and now the furtive eyes had positively a sparkle in their pale, passionless depths—"for instance as—as the abduction of poor Scholes's daughter. You see, she was *his* one ewe lamb; and the preacher might imagine he addressed the guilty David amongst his hearers! What think *you*, Mr. Thomas?"

So quietly, so monotonously the words flowed from the speaker's calm lips—so faint, so almost imperceptible the emphasis on the "you," that no stranger overhearing could have detected the covert force and meaning of his question. But had a serpent bitten Tom Marsden, he could not have felt a sharper sting.

The preacher, of course, generalised, and the arrows he drew from Nathan's quiver, shot at random, went over the head, or made but a slight puncture in Tom's stone of a heart; but the pertinent application of the sermon by a fellow he denominated "a deep file," struck him in the sorest of all places—his impregnable character. He was an old dissembler, but so was Daniel Dent, and he saw his shaft had hit the target in the bull's eye.

They had almost reached the top of Castle Hill, though they had walked leisurely, and Thomas thought to throw his tormentor off at the corner, but the "What think you?" had to be answered.

He avoided it by saying, in his ordinary slow way, "Ah—Scholes; that reminds me, I saw the man at The Willows. Is he at work there?"

"Yes, poor fellow!" responded Mr. Dent, more warmly than usual. "I was quite sorry for him when he came back without tidings of his child, he seemed so disheartened and broken down; and on my representation Mr. Booth found him employment. I have had some talk with the man. He has not relinquished his pursuit, and nurses a spirit of vengeance against the seducer, which augurs ill for that gentleman when he is found out. I should hardly care to stand in his shoes," and again his furtive eyes sought those of Tom, whose coward lips could frame no word of reply.

They were at the corner of Castle Hill, but before Tom Marsden could bow himself off, Mr. Dent brought him to a standstill.

"I conclude you are aware that Scholes found a trinket the girl left behind in her flight?"

"A trinket! No!" exclaimed Tom, off his guard.

"Yes, an earring of rather peculiar pattern, and Scholes regards that as a means to trace his girl and her paramour. Yes; he says that whenever the fellow earring turns up—— But

I am detaining you, Mr. Thomas, and it is close upon your dinner-hour," and Mr. Dent made a feint of moving away.

No; Mr. Dent was not "detaining Mr. Thomas." Mr. Thomas, knowing that *both* earrings were missing, had become secretly anxious to hear more, but he went grey as ashes when Daniel Dent spoke again.

With slow deliberation, which weighted every word, the clerk added—"*And the other earring has turned up!*"

He waited some little time to note the effect of his disclosure before he added—

"*It was found in a shell which Mr. Thomas Marsden brought from Southport for Miss Booth!*"

And now Mr. Dent did move away, leaving Thomas Marsden standing dumb with stupefaction.

Recovering himself, he recalled the wily clerk to ask a question.

"Pardon me, Mr. Dent; who found the supposed fellow to this runaway factory-girl's earring?"

"My sister, Miss Dent, sir; in whose possession it remains."

Mrs. Marsden and Sophia were not a little surprised when Tom brought home a "friend" to dine with them, the friend being no other than Caleb Booth's clerk.

Dinner was waiting, and the cloth already laid, as usual, in the kitchen; but there was a sudden bustle to arrange a fresh dining-table in the parlour—a change attended with grumbling from Ann, who did not scruple to express an opinion that "Sure-ly, what'ns good enow fur the mester moight be good enow fur th' mon."

But though no change in long-established custom was made when their old and intimate friend Mr. Booth, or his daughter Caroline, honoured them with a visit, neither Mrs. Marsden nor Sophia cared to treat Mr. Booth's dependent with like familiarity.

Mrs. Marsden, however, was not either so ill-bred or so anxious to be on good terms with Mr. Dent as to apologise for being unprepared. She was simply distantly ceremonious, Sophia frigidly ceremonious.

Tom, on the contrary, was rather profuse in his apologies, grumbled at the cookery—the lamb was "overdone," the peas were "a bad colour," there was "not sugar enough" in the mint-sauce, the raspberry tart was "heavy as lead," and all to prove to his visitor how sorry he was not to entertain him better; perhaps, too, his own ill-humour wanted a vent.

Daniel Dent was quite sharp enough to know that the civilities

of the ladies was but a thin cover to their chagrin; but he affected not to see it; and endeavoured to convey the impression that, as Mr. Booth's *confidential* manager, he was not much out of place; but no sooner was the cloth withdrawn than the ladies followed, leaving Mr. Tom to "hold the candle to the devil" (as he phrased it in his thoughts) by himself.

Having charge of the keys in his father's absence, that worthy brought a bottle of wine from some unknown depths, trusting to his own ingenuity to account for the deficiency should it be missed, and did his best to play the gracious host, though feeling much like a rat in a trap, with a great grey cat watching at the bars.

I think I have previously observed that it was not Mr. Dent's wont to take wine when he had business on hand and needed to watch his opponent; and that Mr. Tom put in a claim for abstemiousness likewise. They sipped it much as simpering misses at their first party, and talked of anything and everything but the recovered earring, Mr. Dent leading the way. The commercial news of the day, the money-market, the share-market, the fortunes made by successful speculators, and the certainty of success if the speculator only went the right way to work—the gist of it all being that he had a clue to that "right way," and had himself managed to pick up a few of the golden eggs laid by the speculative bird, quiet and unpretending as he looked; and knew where other eggs were to be picked up through his agency.

Then, having baited a hook with a golden fly, he rose to depart, willing to leave his very wide-awake fish to contemplate the vision in his absence.

But Mr. Thomas was not so willing to let him depart without some assurance that the unlucky earring would be kept in the dark. He fidgetted, cracked his knuckles nervously, and finally, locking the parlour door upon the open bottle of wine, took his hat and offered to walk a little way with his visitor.

A faint, peculiar smile stole over the face of Daniel Dent as they stepped out of the garden and went up the town arm-in-arm. It was a public acknowledgment of his social status; and he felt, moreover, that the line was tightening, and he should land his gudgeon.

Thomas Marsden appeared anxious to learn something more of the "Company for the Conversion of Cotton Grass into Textile Fabrics," the shares of which, according to Mr. Dent, were rising so rapidly in the market; but underlying that was the desire to know what Caleb Booth's clerk—or manager—meant.

to do with the trinket he said was in his sister's hands, and a still greater desire to repossess himself of it.

With a view to propitiate Mr. Dent, he expressed his willingness to take fifty of the "Cotton Grass" shares off that individual's hands if inquiry bore out their value (cautious Tom!): but they had strayed together as far as the Lion's Bridge, and yet there was no more said of the earring so prominently dangled before his mental eyes in the forenoon.

Daniel knew the power of silence, and held his tongue.

At length, as they trod the broad level walk, leaving the bridge behind them, Tom himself introduced the subject, with a preliminary crack of a knuckle or two, and a tone of assumed disconnection with the matter altogether.

"You mentioned a lost earring, supposed to have belonged to Scholes's unfortunate daughter, as we left church, Mr. Dent."

Mr. Dent only bowed.

"You say your sister found it in a shell which I had given to Miss Booth. I have been endeavouring to imagine how it could have got there."

Another bow to intimate attention.

"I have been wondering if Miss Booth had earrings of the same pattern, and if in the hasty package of her clothes one may have accidentally slipped into the shell," and he looked a suggestive inquiry into the new manager's face.

"My sister says *not*," was the other's quiet reply, continuing the walk Mr. Thomas seemed desirous to arrest.

Mr. Tom came to a sudden standstill. He clasped one hand across the other, and contracted his brows, as if struck with a painful surprise.

"My dear sir! I am afraid we have made an unpleasant discovery," he said, with a jerky cast of his head backwards once or twice, in a deprecatory sort of motion. "I am sorry to say those shells were left behind by that scapegrace brother of mine." (Mr. Dent turned, he was all attention *now*.) "I gave them to Miss Booth, thinking she would value them for his sake. I am sorry now that I did so!" (Which was true enough.)

Mr. Dent looked at him from under his eyebrows, with a curious, incredulous expression on his face; but he only said "No doubt!"

This was not very encouraging, and there was some hesitation in Tom Marsden's manner as he proceeded, his knuckles keeping up that sort of running accompaniment which Sophia was wont to protest "meant knavery."

"*Yes*, my dear sir, very sorry. It is so painful to come

across fresh proofs of viciousness in one's near relations." And while a sort of pious sigh found its way between his thin lips, his eyes turned hypocritically upwards.

"No doubt!" was again all Mr. Dent's peculiarly accentuated response.

"Ah, Mr. Dent," he went on, "the ways of Providence are most mysterious. To think he should have left behind evidence so conclusive of his guilt!" And he shook his head in a sort of patronage of Providence.

By this time they had reached the great gate on the Leigh side of Atherton Park. Mr. Dent confronted him with a steady look into his sanctimonious eyes. His speech was somewhat curious.

"Then am I to understand, sir, that you wish your brother, Mr. Frederick, to be *accredited* with all that is implied in the possession of that earring?"

"I am afraid, Mr. Dent, no other interpretation can be put upon his flight and that of the girl Nelly."

"And you desire that to be made apparent?" Daniel Dent looked him full in the eyes; and in that look Tom Marsden saw that the other read him through. Still he kept up the show of self-righteous complacence.

"I fear no other construction is open to us."

"I thought Mr. Frederick sailed some months before Nelly Scholes disappeared," suggested Dent, quietly.

"Ah, that might be a blind. He might not sail when he said, or she might follow."

"And you wish that inference to be made when the earring is produced?" Mr. Dent never once implied a belief in Tom's assertion.

"Do you think it absolutely needful to produce it, Mr. Dent?" asked worthy Tom of the imperturbable questioner, as he leaned against the gate. "It would give so much pain to Miss Booth. I would like to spare her feelings."

"No doubt!" was again the sole response.

"Perhaps Miss Dent would see the advantage of silence, if you laid the matter properly before your sister, sir."

"She might if she *saw* the advantage. And she generally thinks as I do," said the brother.

"And what may *you* think, Mr. Dent?"

"That the matter requires consideration," was his prompt reply. "I stand pledged to Scholes. I can *lay my finger* on the seducer of his child. I have evidence sufficient for an outraged father. It rests with me to use or repress that evidence.

I must have time to reflect, Mr. Thomas! If you can lay any sufficient inducement before me to-morrow, as a business man, to change my opinion, I *might* do so to *oblige a friend*. Good afternoon, sir."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BROTHERLY LOVE.

The fabled bear, which, in its fondness for honey, overset a hive, and fell a victim to the wrathful bees, must have felt pretty much as did Mr. Thomas Marsden when Daniel Dent left him to his reflections. And never was he so savage or so ogreish as on that Sunday evening after his return home.

Mrs. Marsden, Sophia, Ann, all went to chapel, and left him to his own companionship, Sophia declaring that he was "intolerable company for anyone else."

Once alone, he gave full vent to his spleen. He paced about the hall and kitchen, stamped on the floor, cursing "the little fool for her carelessness," and threatening to "pay her off for it some day."

Then, having manipulated his knuckles and bitten his long nails to little purpose, he bethought himself of the unfinished bottle of wine, and betook himself to the parlour to seek inspiration from the sherry and the sofa, on which he threw his ugly limbs at full length.

A name on the prospectus of "The Cotton-Grass-Textile-Fabric Manufacturing Company" had given force to Daniel Dent's half threat, and made Tom Marsden's coward heart sink lest one of his own tools should have turned traitor, and put him truly in the power of the bleacher's clerk.

When he quitted the parlour the bottle was empty, but his own temper was no better; and Sophia, who had a request to prefer, was compelled to wait until a more convenient season.

The morning saw him on a chair in Caleb Booth's counting-house, with Daniel Dent looking down upon him from a high stool, carelessly tilted back.

There was little fencing at this interview. Mr. Dent himself opened the ball. He knew what Tom's prompt appearance there indicated.

After shaking hands very cordially, as if with a familiar friend, he began—

"I have been thinking over that matter we discussed yesterday, Mr. Thomas, and have come to the conclusion that it may be to our mutual interest to preserve the friendly relations existing between us, or rather to strengthen them; and am disposed

to advise my sister to keep the discovered earring out of sight."

"Thanks," said Tom, brightening.

But Daniel Dent went on, with barely a pause, and his grey eyes looked more fixedly on his new friend—

"How far we might be inclined to endorse your statement respecting your *brother's* abduction of the girl——"

Tom looked nervously round, at which the other smiled, and broke off to remark—

"There is no one within earshot; you need be under no apprehension, sir."

Then he resumed—

"As I was saying, how far we might be inclined to endorse *your* statement and wishes must depend upon circumstances, my *own view* of the matter *differs so very materially* from yours. Scholes is at present quiescent; and whilst the lion sleeps, Nelly Scholes's seducer is safe. Once on his track, his life is not worth an hour's purchase. But I bear no ill-will either to yourself or to your brother, and am content to remain silent unless I see reason to reverse my decision."

"Well, sir, as my brother's disgrace or punishment must affect our whole family, I can only add that I am obliged to you for your forbearance, and shall not forget it," answered Tom, somewhat relieved on his own account—though he felt pretty well assured Mr. Dent would require a *quid pro quo* one day or other.

It is to be observed they both kept up the farce of a suppositious connection between Fred and Nelly—Tom from a wicked desire to shift responsibility from his own shoulders, and to blind the clerk, who was not to be blinded; he, Daniel, from motives and desires unfathomable to Tom, cunning as he was.

Tom's very suggestion of shifting the onus to Fred had made Dent's heart leap; but he kept his own counsel from all but Harriet, his second self.

Before Tom Marsden left the counting-house (Mr. Booth had not returned from Southport, where Caroline and William then were), he had decided on taking fifty shares in the "Cotton-Grass-Textile-Fabric Manufacturing Company," which, according to Mr. Dent, was being promoted by a friend of his.

He had his foot on the doorstep, when Mr. Dent observed, casually—

"By-the-by, I wonder Mr. Marsden never introduced weaving into his mill. That large empty room on the ground-floor might have been made for it."

"Weaving! Oh, I don't suppose he ever thought of it!" *replied Tom.*

"I suppose not," echoed the clerk. "Good morning."

The dexterous weaver's shuttle had been lightly thrown, but, somehow, all the way home Tom's brain was little better than a weaving-shop. Dent's inadvertent question crossed the woof of textile shares, and interfered with his calculations on their rising value in the market. He had all a gambler's greed and speculative talent, and Mr. Dent had opened out a new field for its exercise.

He was in a better humour when he went home to dinner, and Sophia took advantage of it.

"Tom, I wish you to drive me over to Bolton this week."

Seeing that most of the family drapery came from Bolton, there was nothing remarkable in this proposition; nevertheless it startled him.

"What do you want in Bolton, I should like to know?"

"I am anxious to see Emma. I presume you know she is settled there," answered Sophia.

"Oh, yes, I know; but she'll wait long enough before I put a step on their shop floor! And I think you might have a little more spirit," said he, testily.

He did not care to bring Sophia's quick ears too close to Bolton gossip.

"The spirit of Christianity is forgiveness and forbearance, Tom," said his mother, quietly. "Emma may not like to come here, or to make the first advances; and Sophia's desire to see Mrs. Hindley has my full approval."

"Humph!" was Tom's polite acknowledgment, in a tone which implied—"and much I care for that."

But Sophia pressed her point, and he yielded with a grumbling protest.

On the morrow he must be in Manchester, but having reasons of his own for wishing to see Mr. Bebbington, the solicitor for the Cotton-Grass Company—whose clerk, James Brown, was a private friend of his—he arranged to take her with him on Friday, weather being favourable.

The weather was favourable—much more favourable than Tom himself; and but that Sophia desired no witness to her first interview with her sister, she would have preferred asking the Rev. John to borrow Booth's phaeton, and be her charioteer.

The company of Tom would have been depressing to a less elastic spirit, but so seldom did father or brother drive her abroad, she enjoyed the swift passage through the air, the sight and scent of trees and flowers, and felt exhilarated in spite of his unamiableness.

He stopped the gig in Market-street a few doors from Job Hindley's drapery establishment, with the polite reminder that he should "start from the Black Bull at eight o'clock sharp," and that if she were not there to the minute, he should "leave her behind."

Very charming Sophia looked that morning. She had deft fingers, and for many years had been her own milliner. The white lace bonnet she wore, interspersed with pale pink crape and sprays of artificial hawthorn, bore evidence to her taste, as did the delicate printed muslin dress, over which she wore a deeply-fringed circular cape of rich black silk. She had only just discarded the mourning she had worn for Mrs. Booth.

Job Hindley's shop, although a respectable one, had not been remodelled to modern pattern; the two windows came outwards with a slight sweep or bay; there were no large panes of plate glass (it was too recent an innovation), and customers had to ascend a couple of steps.

Sophia tripped up these lightly, and came face to face with Emma, who stood behind the counter with body bent and head slightly brought forward, as if prepared to attend the new customer.

Her sudden start and change of colour told of swift recognition; then her business smile vanished, she set her face like a flint, and was the same stolid, impassive Emma as of yore.

"Emma!" said Sophia, extending her hand, and leaning across the counter to offer a sisterly kiss, "are you not glad to see me?"

"That depends!" was Emma's curt reply, offering her cheek coldly. "How is my mother?"

"She was quite well when I left home this morning, and sent her dear love to you."

Sophia rather thought that a moisture gathered in Mrs. Hindley's eyes as she murmured, with a slight catching of the breath, "Did she?" evidently softened.

Mr. Hindley was at the opposite counter, doing his best to serve a fastidious buyer.

"You had better come into the parlour, Sophy, if you are not too proud," suggested the draper's wife, leading the way, while Sophia, on the other side of the counter, followed Emma, who lifted a trap at the end for her passage, as she responded—

"If I had been too proud, Emma, you would not have seen me here."

"Well, I suppose not. But you have not hurried yourself

to come," remarked Mrs. Hindley, as she ushered Sophia into a plain but comfortable back-parlour, closing the glass door of communication behind them.

"Until last week both myself and mother were utterly ignorant what had become of you," answered Sophia, taking the seat her sister offered; "and then we learned it by accident from Jim. Father is in Buxton, or I might not have been here now; and the Ogre was not too willing to bring me, I assure you. And what is more, Emma, I don't think I am very welcome now I am here."

Emma had been leaning with her elbow on the mantel-shelf, above which was a looking-glass in a rosewood frame, a missionary box, and a pair of china lambs. Evidently she was pondering over something; though her countenance betrayed no more emotion than the shelf she leaned on.

She answered coldly enough, "The value of a visit depends on motive. What brought you here now? But you say you knew nothing of us. That cannot be. I wrote to my mother as soon as our shop was stocked and opened."

Sophia threw herself back in her chair, and looked up in her face questioningly.

"You did?" adding with a flash of intelligence, "Then all I can say is, the Ogre will have stopped the letter. Mother never had it."

"You had better come upstairs and take your things off," said Mrs. Hindley, with more warmth than she had hitherto displayed. "Dinner will be ready at twelve o'clock;" and she led the way to a bedroom overhead (an open door revealing a quietly-furnished drawing-room above the shop), which was neat and compact, but without hangings or any other superfluity. She had not been accustomed to the luxuries of life in her father's mansion, and of needful requirements there seemed no dearth. Inexpensive drugget occupied the place of carpeting; drawers and washstand were of painted deal; the toilet ware, though far from costly, was not inelegant; the toilet glass, though not large, was clear and true. There were pure white covers on drawers, and bed, and table.

Altogether, the small room looked to Sophia more comfortable than her own scant desert at Tyldesley, and she said so.

Apparently pleased, Emma led her sister into the front room. Here, too, the floor was covered with printed drugget. Half-a-dozen mahogany chairs with black hair seats, a corresponding couch, a round centre table, and a plain chiffonier, were all the furniture, save muslin curtains, a small chimney-glass, cheap fire-

irons, and a light-blue tissue paper grate-apron of Emma's own manufacture.

It was speckless, but cold, and Sophia preferred the back room downstairs, the old-fashioned furniture and bookshelf of which had that air of family use so essential to cosiness.

As Mrs. Hindley exhibited the drawing-room (superior to aught at her old home), she remarked—

"We have nothing expensive, Sophia; our means were limited, and Luke said the stock was our first consideration—we must first 'creep and then go.' We got nothing but what we could pay for honestly, and look for a blessing upon."

The close of this self-complacent speech took Sophia somewhat aback. A vision of burnt fingers and bank notes floated before her sight, and it was with an effort she checked the word "honestly!" which rose as an echo to her lips. She had come with the intention to set her own mind at rest respecting those notes, and Emma's speech had somewhat disconcerted her. Perhaps Ann had been mistaken after all.

She was puzzling how to introduce so delicate a subject, when Emma, clad in the shining robes of pious impeccability, all unconscious of speck or spot, as it were, bared her breast to the smiter.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN BOLTON.

"I DARESAY you all wondered what had become of me when I left home without leave?" said Emma, in a tone half-assertive, half-interrogative.

"Indeed, Emma, we did," assented her younger sister (without adding the free comments of Tyldesley on the elopement); 'though, considering the house you left, we could hardly blame you for *that*. But surely so good a mother might have been spared the pain you inflicted."

"Ah, well, what's done can't be undone! I'd no notion anyone at home cared enough for me to be troubled what became of me."

"Oh, Emma!" was Sophia's remonstrance, as she dropped into a chair by the window.

"Well, I did leave a letter in my top drawer," she replied, somewhat aggrieved.

"Yes; and your letter gave almost as much pain as surprise. Father was furious. You see, no one had any idea of your courtship."

Emma's lip curled slightly. "Of course not. Who was expected to fall in love with an ill-educated, homely woman like me? But Job preferred Christian graces to those of form and fashion; and so we suit each other." And her heart cooled into complacence.

"The greatest wonder of all, to mother and father, was where you got the means to begin business," said Sophia, regarding her attentively.

A faint smile flitted across the other's face.

"A special Providence provided the means," rejoined she, composedly.

"Oh, Emma," exclaimed Sophia, off her guard, "you cannot surely call the abstraction of your father's bank notes a *Providence!* I know what *he* would call it, if *he knew!*"

A flush came over the face of Emma, she had thought her secret so secure. A few brief questions and answers told how suspicion had arisen. But Emma viewed the matter in a light of her own. Standing in front of her sister, and laying her right hand on Sophia's left shoulder, she argued the case after this manner—

"Look you, Sophy; your aunt took care that you were well educated and well provided for. I was neither educated nor provided for. I was snubbed and uncared for."

"Oh, Emma!" again protested Sophia; but she went on without pause—

"The only place where I heard a word of love or kindness was at chapel, or at our prayer meetings, and Job was the one to speak them. He must have thought me very different from other cotton-spinners' daughters to have ventured to address me at all."

"Different, indeed!" murmured Sophia, under her breath.

She proceeded—

"In the eyes of God all His Christian followers are equal, and I lost sight of our difference in position; or, rather, I thought the pious draper's assistant better than the tyrannical, miserly cotton-spinner, whose religion was all cant and hypocrisy. We had been engaged for five years. Job had been saving up, and, unknown to you all, I had been working with my needle to help to make a small home comfortable for us. We did not care how humble."

"We thought you sewed for the Dorcas Charity?"

"Well, so I did—now and then."

"Don't you think *that* was a *little bit of hypocrisy*, Emma?" asked Sophia, dryly.

But Emma's armour of self-righteousness was proof against such a dart.

"No, the end sanctified the means. But you interrupt me. You remember the cake thrown across the kitchen at my face? Well, that day I made up my mind to bear no more; and Job and I were planning how we should furnish a small cottage, when father's drunken cunning led him to put his bank notes into the very mouth of an oven. And I say, and will maintain, that it was a kind Providence led me to rake out that oven-top and rescue them from the burning to minister to our great needs."

"Then I suppose it was Providential that my tissue-paper should be at hand to aid you in duplicity?" interrupted Sophia.

Placid Emma fired up.

"Look you, Sophia; we regard this from two different points. You have never been used as I have. Everyone admired you—everyone loved you. Who admired me? Who cared for me? Who spared my feelings? Who thought I had any? If I was cold and immoveable as a rock, I was what I had been made. When you are tried and tempted as I was, you will estimate things

differently. I say it *was* a Providence, and we thanked God for it. And it was *not theft!* But for me the notes would have been burned to ashes. I put the tissue-paper there, not to deceive, but to *try*. If that had been unburnt, I should have put the notes back. But you saw *that* went to ashes. And if father had clothed me and educated me like other manufacturers' daughters, it would have cost him far more than five hundred pounds. I consider he owed me more than I found."

Sophia shook her head.

"Sophistry, Emma—sophistry."

"Don't say that, Sophia. Both I and Job have considered this question in all its bearings, and we cannot regard it as anything but a special leading of Providence. Had it been otherwise, Job would not have dared to ask a blessing on it. He is a pious man, and makes me a very good husband. And now come downstairs. There is the clock striking; dinner will be on the table, and Job would, I know, like to shake hands with you before he calls in the apprentice, or says grace."

And Sophia, seeing that Emma had convinced herself that she had done nothing dishonourable or reprehensible, shrugged her shoulders, and followed down the enclosed staircase to the room below, where a table was already set out for dinner; and Job Hindley, plain, angular, serene, and bland, stood sharpening his carving knife and appetite over a shoulder of mutton, in which he forebore plunging the blade pending the preliminary grace.

"Job, here is my sister come to see us," was the wife's announcement.

Job bent over the table as if bowing over the counter to a customer, smiled, and said—

"I am sure I feel grateful for the condescension, Miss Marsden. I hope I have the pleasure to see you well?"

But he did not offer his hand—perhaps, in his humility, afraid she might not take it. Miss Sophia was a very different being in his eyes from the one he had made his wife.

"Job, dear, where is Ramsden?" (the apprentice) asked Mrs. Hindley, as they took their seats.

"I thought, as you had a visitor, he had better dine with Bridget in the kitchen."

"Thank you, dear, you are very thoughtful," was Emma's reply; then turning to her sister she remarked, "My Job is always considerate—he thinks of everything;" to which connubial pat on the back Sophia could find no other response than "Indeed?"

The grace was shorter than might have been expected—per-

haps Mr. Job remembered that the mutton was cooling—the carving knife did its duty, the potatoes baked under the meat were duly helped, Bridget had poured out the ale, and little was said until the draper's keen appetite was somewhat appeased; then he began to ask—but always with a sort of shy humility—about Tyldesley and its people. He had not been there since his marriage.

Amongst others he named Scholes—asking if he had "got over the loss of his daughter. By-the-by," he added, "I believe I saw that—that misguided young woman about a month ago—I could not affirm it, Miss Marsden (as I said to my wife); dress makes such an alteration in a person. And there is no knowing how Nelly Scholes would look in a pink satin bonnet, a pink llama dress, and a velvet mantle. The likeness was very striking; but then, as I said——"

Interrupting him, Sophia asked, "Was she alone?"

"No, and that was another thing, Miss Marsden (as I said to my wife), that rather puzzled me. She was with a comfortable, motherly sort of woman, just for all the world like a decent farmer's wife, not at all the sort of person we should have expected a—a—Nelly Scholes to have been with. But then, when we reflect that they were going together into that pit of perdition, a play-house, it is hard to think what the old woman might be. As I remarked to Emma, she might be one of the devil's ministers, and the other one of the fallen angels. She certainly did look very much like an angel, Miss Marsden, and we all know——"

His long-winded remarks were closed by a summons from the shop, whither Emma had preceded him, and Sophia was left to reflect on angels in pink bonnets and llama dresses.

Presently he returned, rubbing his hands as if he had done a pleasant stroke of business.

"Do you know, Miss Marsden," he began, "it was somewhat singular that, happening to pass the theatre again on my way home the same night, I saw a gentleman go in at one of the doors so like your brother, Mr. Thomas, I came home and told Emma; I was so amazed. Of course I know Mr. Thomas would never go into a sinful place like that; but I met the gentleman full in the face under one of the lamps, and, as I said to my wife, although he had moustachios and a tuft of hair upon his chin, I was quite startled by the likeness. It was remarkable!"

"Very!" murmured Sophia, lost in the train of thought he had set running.

"Yes, both my wife and I—she is a capital wife, Miss Marsden—thought it very remarkable that I should have come across two people so very like old Tyldesley acquaintances in one night, and near such a place of all others."

And so he went maundering on; with occasional excursions into the shop, varied by Emma's return, and tea, and talk about chapel-folk, and the preacher they "sat under," until it was time for Sophia to meet her brother at the Black Bull. Job Hindley proffered his escort, which a twinge of pride at first prompted her to decline; but he repeated his offer with the remark that "there are always rough people hanging about inn doors," and she on second thoughts did "condescend" to accept the draper brother-in-law as her cavalier.

Job Hindley was better than no one to pilot her through crowded Bradshawgate, and she was glad to have even a prosy companion in the inn parlour, when eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock struck without bringing Thomas to the Black Bull, and a sudden storm broke over the town. And during that long waiting time, after the storm had spent itself, she managed to drop a casual hint that if he chanced to see either Tom's double, or that of Nelly Scholes again, she should like to know of it—"the likeness was so singular."

Smiler had been harnessed more than two hours and a half when Tom showed his ill-tempered face at the wide bar-window, and asked for Smiler to be put in the gig, and for his sister almost in a breath.

He scowled at Job Hindley, but said never a word of thanks or greeting, though he saw the draper offer Sophia the courtesy he omitted, he leaving her to clamber into the high gig as best as she could. But Job seemed as if he could not do her too much honour, bowing respectfully as he said "Good night." And all the disagreeable ride home was enlivened with Tom's sneers and sarcasms at a brother-in-law who was infinitely better than himself, though he did serve behind a counter, and did thank a special Providence for carpeting his path with somebody else's bank notes.

The fact was Tom's day had been cut out for him, and he did not like the shape it had taken.

He had done a little business in yarn, when he thought he might as well call at Bebbington's office in Mawdsley-street, and in conjunction with his friend, the solicitor's clerk, devise some plan to circumvent or silence Daniel Dent, if that individual threatened to become troublesome. Moreover, he wished to know something more of the Cotton-Grass Company before

he consented to be put upon the directorate, as Mr. Dent desired, and his own craving for distinction prompted.

Fancy how he was disconcerted when, turning the corner of Exchange-street, he saw Daniel Dent and James Brown in deep conference on the office steps, not as men discussing open business, but as conspirators, with their heads close, as if afraid the lintels might have ears for their whispers.

He would have turned back; but Dent, whose eyes were everywhere, caught sight of him just as the solicitor's clerk was saying—

"He leaves the gig at the Black Bull, and when he has done his business—hurrying over the ground—whatever part of the town he may be in, he dives through back streets to the White Lion, where a horse is ready for him, and then pelts away up Chorley-street like mad."

A low "Hsh!—here he is!" from Daniel, stopped this confidential communication, and both extended their hands to meet his. Dirty hands all, figuratively speaking.

"How's trade?" began Mr. Dent.

"Oh, pretty fair," answered Thomas. "How is it with you?"

"Oh, brisk," replied Dent, further volunteering the information, "I came hither to-day to give your name to Mr. Bebbington as a desirable director of the 'Cotton-Grass.' May I hope you had the same errand?" and his look said, "I would advise you to say 'Yes.'"

Tom did not vouchsafe a direct answer. "Is Mr. Bebbington in, sir?" he put to the clerk, as if they had no other relations than those comprised in Mr. Bebbington's business.

Mr. Bebbington was not in. That ascertained, Thomas Marsden would have taken his leave, but Mr. Dent had no mind to let him go so readily.

Pulling out a silver watch—a token of Mr. Booth's appreciation—he made the astonishing remark, "How time flies!"—appending thereto an invitation to Mr. Thomas to join himself and Mr. Brown in a snack in a quiet house close at hand, if he would so far "condescend."

But the "condescend" was not used as Job Hindley had used it, nor as the bleacher's modest clerk would have employed it a few months back.

Fain would Thomas Marsden have declined, for he was expected at the Moor Farm; but, added to his desire to keep on good terms with Mr. Dent, was a craving to ascertain what secret business his own tool, James Brown, could have with Caleb Booth's clerk, or, rather, manager.

But the twain were quite as clever as he was, and as close.

Tom Marsden was no stranger to the "quiet house," where a faint clicking of billiard balls came ever and anon as an accompaniment to the other music of knives and forks during their "snack"—a luncheon Mr. Dent insisted on flavouring with a bottle of sherry, as representative of Caleb Booth. No wonder that the constant recurrence of the sound introduced the game as a topic of conversation, in the dearth caused by mistrust and uncongeniality; and less wonder that Mr. Dent, who professed not to have "handled a cue for many years," should propose a game "for the tables" to Mr. Thomas, who confessed to an occasional game when he had time on his hands after business.

But it was a wonder that James Brown, who openly avowed his weakness alike for billiards and wine, left both on a plea of being due at the office—that plea having ordinarily so little weight that Mr. Bebbington had serious thoughts of sending him about his business.

It is possible that a look and a hint from Mr. Dent accelerated his departure.

"That fellow's as tenacious as a limpet—there's positively no getting rid of him!" protested Mr. Daniel, when he saw from the window his legal acquaintance fairly turn the corner.

"Well, he does stick like a burr; and so I've told him, scores of times," echoed Tom, forgetting for the moment that he had assumed to have no prior intimacy with the lawyer's clerk.

"I am not much of a wine-bibber myself, Mr. Thomas, but I wish to reciprocate your hospitality last Sunday" (Tom winced), "and this meeting is so auspicious that—what say you, shall we crack another bottle together, or, if you have an hour to spare, adjourn to the billiard-room? I confess I should like to try my hand again. I was once accounted a good player."

Tom, not caring to drink too much in Dent's company, seconded the adjournment, though his entertainer somewhat touched his withers by observing lightly, as the marker handed him his cue—

"I suppose it is not orthodox for Mr. Booth's manager to be seen playing billiards in business hours. But neither is it orthodox for a pious Nonconformist to play them at *any* hour; so I think we may be trusted to keep counsel in *this* matter"—and his peculiar smile was slightly ironical.

CHAPTER XXX.

A THUNDERSTORM.

For unpractised hands, the two were marvellously good players, well pitted against each other; but Tom lost his temper whenever his balls missed their mark, and that gave the cooler man the advantage, so that in the end Tom was the loser.

The loss was not much, seeing that they only "played for the tables;" but he had all his father's niggardliness over small sums; and, in much irritation, he threw down his cue with a very unpietic oath, reminded by a striking church clock that he was losing his time as well as his money—and self-control.

He put on his coat and hat, and would have bid Mr. Dent "good day," but that serene individual proved as much a limpet as James Brown, and was not to be shaken off.

"I am going your way; we may as well walk together as far as Bradshawgate," quoth Mr. Dent, putting his arm through the other's.

Tom gave his knuckles an impatient crack, then answered dryly—

"But I am not going to Bradshawgate, sir, just yet. My way lies towards Deansgate."

"Ah, that is still more fortunate. I put up at the Woolpack, in Deansgate. Companionship will not take me out of my way."

In wrathful silence Tom strode on through Acres Field, turned sharply to his left, and crossed Hotel-street into Market-street, hurried past the Commercial Hall and Hindley's without casting a glance towards the latter, and as he emerged into Deansgate, made one more effort to free himself from his adhesive friend, and succeeded.

He took a leaf from Daniel's book, and, saying he was thirsty, stuck to *him* until he saw him seated in the bar of the Woolpack, then gulping down his ale at a draught, took his angular limbs off before the other had been served with his brandy and water.

But he followed for all that, close enough to be within hearing of the volley of oaths pious Mr. Thomas launched on the head of the ostler, who kept him waiting five minutes on the step of the White Lion for his steed; and then Daniel Dent went back to his brandy and Mr. James Brown tolerably well pleased.

He had an excellent appetite, had Tom. The broiled chicken had indeed been a "snack" only to him, and he was hungry as any fabulous ogre. Nearly seven o'clock, a long road between him and his dinner, and Sophia to meet at the Black Bull at "eight o'clock sharp." He growled and spurred the beast, and galloped on as if he had been the very Black Rider himself.

The sun was westering in a sky of ominous red, with purple clouds rolling heavily up, and as their lurid glare tinged streams and wind-swept foliage, he speculated whether the storm would burst before he was under shelter. "As for Sophy, d—— her! She would come, and she may wait!"

He had reached a lonely level of Chorley-road as this brotherly exclamation burst from him.

His eyes, which had been turned upwards to scan the unpromising heavens, in lowering rested on a woman in tawdry finery, soiled and torn, seated on the low lichen-covered milestone he was nearing.

Involuntarily—he never could tell why—he checked his horse's speed, as the woman, with feathers and scarf streaming behind her, darted forward and clutched at the reins as though her own risk had no place in her thought.

He shrank in his saddle as that gaunt, faded woman gripped the reins, and cried in a voice hoarse with pent-up rage—

"What devil's pace is this you're riding now, Tom Marsden? What fresh act of villainy spurs you along this road, Tom Marsden, day and night?"

He had crouched at the first sound of her voice; now he tried to shake loose the reins, and roared, as if in invitation to the coming thunder—

"How dare you stop a gentleman on the high road, you dirty tramp?"

She took up his words as they left his thin, white, quivering lips, and, with a scornful shout, retorted—

"Gentleman—eh?—a fine gentleman! But only *man* enough to make such 'dirty tramps' as me! You ugly, raw-boned, black-hearted coward—Poll Sharrock spits at you!"

The horse grew restive, but she held on with the grip of a strong man, or a lunatic, and drowned his harsh command to "loose the reins" with her excited volubility: and, coward as he was, his conscience held him under the sharp whip of her tongue.

"Ay, coward—false, lying, sneaking coward—you thought yourself well rid of the woman you had fondled and petted to her ruin, when you left me penniless in Ormskirk, with a dead babe by my side, to bury it and get my living as best I could."

"You vicious hussy, you only had your deserts!" he yelled in a white wrath.

"My God!" cried the woman. "Hear him! Only my deserts! Look you, Tom Marsden; I have tramped from town to town, vile amongst the vile, in search of you, and I have tracked you here with some fresh villainy on foot; and, by the angry heavens above us, I'll hunt you to the death."

Livid with rage and craven fear, again he shook the reins, and the horse plunged; but she kept her hold, and, whilst the thunder rolled overhead, changed her tone to a note of solemn warning.

"Hear *it*, and me, you conscience-stricken wretch! I'll neither shoot, nor stab, nor poison you, but I'll follow in your footsteps like grim death. I'll blight your life as you have blighted mine, until I make your soul the hell that mine is."

She had raised one hand up to the thunderous canopy of sky, and now he freed himself, and at once, to baffle and escape her, ran his horse to the leap, where a fence was broken low, and dashed across the country as if pursued by demons—her last cry ringing in his ears all the way he went:

"Go! and Poll Sharrock's curse go with you!" The very thunder reverberating from Rivington Pike seemed to echo it.

There was no jauntiness in the Mr. Thomas who called to "Giles" at the Moorhouse Farm that night. A drenched, cowed, shivering wretch flung himself off the horse, and strode up the pathway with fear and rage fighting in his breast for mastery, as were the elements conflicting overhead, regardless of the perfume the rain dashed out from the flowers.

All the innate bully showed himself when once beyond the oaken spear.

There was no savoury odour of cookery in that wide kitchen. The farmer, with his wife and son, sat on a chair or settle, washing down their supper of bread and cheese with large mugs of home-brewed ale; but there was no dainty tid-bit waiting for him! There was no cloth laid on the bay-wood table in the parlour, and on the sofa lay Nelly, her face showing that she had wept herself to sleep.

"A nice welcome this is to a hungry man, who has ridden through a thunderstorm to see you!" was his first salute, as, roused by the clatter he made, she rubbed her eyes, and, with all the haste she could, ran to embrace him.

He shook her off; he was in no mood for love or kindliness.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried, "we gave you up when the storm came on. Dinner was a' spoiled wi' waitin.'"

"Ah, I reckon it was not overlong you waited for your dinner, or for me either," was his surly response.

"Oh, Tom, dear, dunnot say so! Aw've not had mi dinner at a'. Aw'd just a cup o' tea hauve an hour sin', and aw cried mysen to sleep fur varry lonesomeness;" and she laid her hand on his wet sleeve appealingly.

"There now, you're at it again. Lonesome, indeed! If I hear any more of it, I'll leave you altogether; and then you'll be lonesome enough."

Tears started to Nelly's eyes, and fear to her heart, as he uttered this coarse threat, vague as it was to her; but she tried to keep them back, as she said, timorously, "How wet you are! Had you not better change your clothes?"

"Don't bother about my clothes." He knew Sophia's quick eyes would certainly detect a change of raiment.

At this juncture Mrs. Fernhead tapped at the door and came in.

She had heard, and she saw, that something was amiss, and being a kindly, motherly sort of woman, did her best to smooth the bear's rough hide, for the sake of the young creature who was but in a delicate state, and needed love and cherishing, not harshness and brutality.

"Wouldn yo' moind comin' to th' kitchen foire an' drying yoursen, Mester Tummas? Aw've bundled th' lads off to bed, an' theer's nobbody but th' mester an' me. An' then aw moight frizzle yo' a rasher, an' mak' yo' a jug o' egg-flip, to keep th' cold out. Yo're own dinner wur brunt to a cinder wi' waitin'."

With a growl and a grumble he assented. The grandmother's easy-chair, with the cushion freshly shaken up, was placed for him; and another close beside for Mrs. Thomas. But Nelly preferred to lay the white cloth on the deal table, and otherwise help the good dame as she bustled about, and placed over the glowing coals the pink and white rashers, smoothly cut by the farmer himself from a ham of their own curing.

Yet Nelly was not at all well; she had been terrified both by his absence and the awful storm, and not all her efforts could make her a lively companion.

In his dudgeon he took umbrage at that, and said he shouldn't be "in a hurry to ride through a storm again for nothing but a rasher of ham and a sulky woman."

Mrs. Fernhead whispered something in his ear.

"Pooh! bother! It's always the same nowadays, always the water-pot running!" was his polite answer; but he put his hand into his pocket, and gave a five-pound note to the farmer's cheery wife.

"Here, dame, I owe you something; take it out of that, and give the balance to *her* in the morning." A jerk of the head indicated who he meant by "her."

After awhile he rose, saying he must be off—his sister was waiting for him. He did not say *where*.

Giles was abed. Mr. Fernhead went to the stable for the horse. The storm was over and the sky clear.

Mrs. Fernhead delicately retired, presuming the husband might have last words to say to his young wife.

A very demon seemed to have taken possession of him that night. He had cracked his knuckles viciously from the moment he laid down his knife and fork.

He did not seize the opportunity afforded him to cheer up the drooping girl by his side with fond words and endearments; but mentally tracing back his meeting with Poll Sharrock to his detention by Daniel Dent, and Dent's familiarity to the mislaid earring, he proceeded to upraid her with a want of affection for him, as shown in the careless loss of one earring after the other (*he* had taken the second to get it matched), and told her that her negligence might bring ruin on both of them.

And when she laid her cheek against his arm, and tried, with fast-falling tears, to exculpate herself, he shook himself free with a rough jerk, and strode out of the kitchen without a kiss or a good-bye.

When the farmer, after standing in the porch to watch the horseman riding helter-skelter down the dark lane, came back into the light kitchen, he found Nelly in a swoon on the floor, having struck against the iron fender in falling.

In a few minutes the house was all astir, and Nelly—brought to her senses with vinegar and burnt feathers—was carried gently to her white dimity camp-bed.

By the same hour the following night a dead babe lay in the house, and a young mother whose life trembled in the balance.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON HIS TRACK!

Tom's wetting in the thunderstorm might not have mattered much had he taken Nelly's advice and changed his clothes; but the cold-blooded mortal had dried them on his back, and before two days were over he was ill—in reality this time.

A letter from Minshull brought Simeon Marsden post-haste from Buxton, so anxious about his favoured son that he forgot to parade fanciful ailments of his own, which indeed his healthy red face would have discredited.

His road lying through Manchester, he brought Dr. White with him. And then the house was all astir with blistering, poulticing, and physicking for three weeks or a month.

It was a terrible time to Tom, a sort of Nemesis for all his sham shiverings and tremblings, and his manufactured cough.

For now a cough rent his frame and tore, and shook, and choked him; sharp lances seemed to dart through chest and lungs; and conscience whispered that Poll Sharrock's curse had fallen on him. And then, between his pains and paroxysms, he began to repent his harshness to poor Nelly, and to wish he had her there to watch and wait on him. No one there, not even his mother, was half loving or attentive enough to please him. His distempered fancy read "serves him right" on all three feminine faces, and for the first day or so this might have been the case; but not when he became seriously in peril. His own condition awakened him to that of Nelly; and he would fain have written, or got some one else to write, to her; but there was no one he dared trust with his secret.

Then he pondered whether if he were to have her educated, and taught to play the piano like Sophia (his views of education and accomplishments, be sure, were limited), his father would accept her as a wife for him. For somehow, her prettiness, her helplessness, and devotion had made as much impression on Tom's hard heart as it could receive, and if he did love anyone besides himself it was little Nelly. He was glad he had left the five-pound note with Mrs. Fernhead.

But supposing he should not recover, what would become of her then? He thought of Poll Sharrock, and shuddered.

His thoughts, it may be seen, were not the pleasantest of companions, and when his father echoed his frequent groans, he little imagined how much more mental than physical pain wrung them from him.

Then a fear of death came over him, and as one or other of his chapel friends came to pray by his bedside, and drew vivid pictures of the "Valley of the Shadow," and the "Bottomless Pit," and the "Saints' Rest," his guilty soul felt its unfitness for the last, and that Poll Sharrock had doomed him to the other, yawning for him.

When at length he did leave his bed—much to his surprise, too feeble to stand—he was all impatience to get out, if only to a post-office; but he had to wait for that, and when a week later still he posted a letter containing another bank note to "Mrs. Thomas, Moor Farm, Rivington," and got no reply—though, for the good of his health, he walked daily through the park to Leigh post-office—something like fear crept over him. Cramped as was Nelly's self-taught writing, he would have been glad to have seen only a line from her *now*.

The convalescent had other visitors besides the Christian brethren of his class. Mr. Booth drove over, and Daniel Dent came occasionally, and the Rev. John Hay quite won the favour of Simeon Marsden by his attention during the whole time of illness. He remembered the curate's visits to himself the previous autumn, and was grateful enough to receive him now quite hospitably.

Tom was not altogether so sure of the curate's disinterestedness, though, lacking strength even for mischief, he said nothing. But had Mr. Marsden suspected that attachment to the daughter, and not the son, drew him over twice or thrice a week, and had done all the while he was in Buxton, he might have shut against him the doors he opened so readily. And could he have seen John Hay hand over to the delighted mother a letter sent from the Cape by her other son, he would certainly have clenched and shaken in the clergyman's face, without any respect to his cloth, the hand he offered so readily to his clasp.

Let it not be supposed that the curate was at all of a clandestine or timorous nature. He was from the first desirous to walk bravely up to Mr. Marsden and say: "I love your daughter—give her to me." But Sophia, knowing her father's craving for wealthy alliances for sons and daughters both, had been afraid of exposing her budding happiness to the blight of her father's veto, and opposed a pleading "not yet" to his impatience—further warned by her father's unbridled fury on her

sister's secret marriage. You see, the man who denied wife and daughters pocket-money, lived in an unfinished, half-furnished mansion, dined in a kitchen and counted out candles, yet had notions that his reputed wealth should, like the loadstone, attract wealth—aye, and social status too.

The curate, a man of good family, considered his birth more than an equivalent for guineas shut up in a prospective father-in-law's pocket; and as he had a sort of sick longing to brighten up his lonely hearth with her sparkling presence, he was not likely to defer to the "not yet" much longer; but "Man proposes—God disposes."

It was not until Thomas was on the mending list that Daniel Dent showed how purposeful were *his* visits. His first dropped hint about "weaving" had expanded beyond the project for the combination of weaving and spinning in the one establishment, and he demonstrated to his own satisfaction, and to Tom's, how grand a return it would yield, and how, as promoters, he and Tom might pocket large sums as "promotion-money" by converting the firm into a company, and selling the plant to the shareholders; and how the firm of Marsden and Son would realise a fabulous amount on their "plant" and connection.

He did not air this project all at once. That was not Mr. Dent's policy. He was in the habit of feeling his way: dropping a seed, watering it occasionally, and leaving soil, sun, and rain to do the work for which he waited.

Gradually, too, he made Tom aware that he knew more of his private history than was patent to the public; but implied that, so long as their interests were identical, as he felt assured they were, Tom might rely, not only on his silence and that of Miss Dent, but on their co-operation if necessary. Moreover, he sounded the shattered wreck of unlovable humanity before him anent his views and sentiments towards Caroline Booth; and discovered, to his intense satisfaction, that, though the worthy individual had once "thought of trying it on, to cut out his brother, he had given it up, as not worth the candle."

He did not, however, take Mr. Dent so far into his confidence as to explain how much conscience and Nelly Scholes had influenced his changed intentions; or that he seriously thought of fitting the young factory-girl to preside in due season over the mansion on the hill, as he had promised her (with no such meaning) in the sand-pit hut.

Very, very slow was his recovery—if that could be called recovery which left him all he had once simulated—a veritable, broken-down, chronic invalid. His very impatience to hear

from the Moor Farm retarded his progress. He wrote again and again, but no answer was returned.

Contrary to old usage, he professed himself able to resume his duties in the mill and his out-door business long before Mr. Marsden was willing he should risk his precious life; and his first proposition to "do Bolton" was met by the old man with a flat interdict as the act of a madman.

"Eh, thah's no more fit to face the wind than thah's fit to fly. Why, if Bess were to bolt at a hurdy-gurdy or a box organ (a failing of the beast), thah'd ha' no strength to hold her in. But I'm fain to see thee so keen o'er the business, lad. It's a good sign."

Perhaps Mr. Marsden might have changed his opinion had he known the whole of the business the son, snugly ensconced in the easiest chair in the warmest corner of the kitchen hearth, was so keen about.

Another week had elapsed before Tom, muffled and wrapped, with Jim as his whip, was allowed to have his own way, and attended the Monday market at Bolton, having first promised his anxious father to be home before nightfall.

"Good shuttance o' bad rubbish!" exclaimed Ann, as the gig drove off; and if neither Sophia nor the mother echoed the woman's honest outburst, they certainly felt the atmosphere clearer and purer for his absence.

He showed himself on 'Change, effected a few sales at average prices, and then, avoiding the main streets, made his way to the White Lion, hastily swallowed a chop and a glass of bitter beer, whilst a horse was groomed and saddled for him; then, mounting slowly, tore away along the old route at a pace which shook his loose bones, and would have astonished Simeon Marsden could he have seen him.

Had Nelly written to him, whether lovingly, cheerfully, or complainingly, he would in all probability have been as churlish as of old; but her silence had at once alarmed and stimulated him.

When he, on the Thursday of the thunderstorm, to escape and baffle Poll Sharrock, the woman he had betrayed and wantonly deserted years before, dashed over fence and ditch, field and moorland, he over-leapt more than the fence.

Had he kept to the high road, he must have been lost to sight and pedestrian pursuit at least a mile and a half before he turned off at Rivington Lane; and the tracks of one more horse on the muddy, hoof-and-storm-beaten macadam would not have been distinguishable by the keenest Indian ever drawn by Fenimore

Cooper. But when he tore across the country, over corn-fields and potato-fields, grassland and moorland; trampled down beans, and barley, and oats, he left a trail a child might have followed.

The storm, pelting down the growing crops, did its best to cover his retreat, and wash fresh hoof-prints from the mould; but ears and stalks, leaves and pods, beaten, cut, and stamped into the ground, had no vitality to lift them from the ground again.

And so the morrow that found farmers growling, found resolute Poll Sharrock following in Tom's wake, and promising the angry agriculturists to find the trespasser that they might "have the law of him."

Yet, as he had not ridden all the way in a direct line to the Moor Farm, but, skirting the stream, had regained the road by Rivington Lane Bridge, she there lost trace of him.

But never had hound so keen a scent, so untiring a foot, as a vindictive woman. Not a cottager, a child, a ploughboy, or a shepherd but she plied with cunningly-varied inquiries about a big-boned moustachioed horseman who rode that way from time to time, and often after dark.

Country people, as a rule, go to bed with the sun, and are fast asleep at the hours during which Tom Marsden had travelled that road so long (on horses obtained from his father's stable through the medium of a false key, to the terror and perplexity of Jim); and country people commonly sleep too soundly after their out-door labour to be roused by a passing horseman; so Poll Sharrock's quest might have been a long one had she not stumbled on Giles, the farm-servant at Moor House.

"Eh, what dost ta say? Mustachus an' big boons! Why, that mun be Measter Tummas!"

"Yes, his name is Thomas," eagerly interjected the woman.

"Eh, then, his pratty woife lives at our farm. Hoo's just had a babby; but it wur deead, an' hoo's not much loike to get ower it. Hoo's badly, hoo is."

What stirred Poll Sharrock that she trembled so? Was she faltering? Not she.

She put a sixpence into the man's hand.

"Thank you," said she; "I think you said your farm was——"

"Measter Fernyead's; onybody knows th' Moor Farm. If yo' nobbut turn deawn yon lane, it's straight afore yo' as a furrow."

She had got all she wanted from the man; but Poll Sharrock, depraved as she owned herself to be, fierce and revengeful as she was, had still a touch of humanity lingering within, and had no mind to wreak her vengeance on a sick and helpless woman, whose case seemed to be so sadly like her own.

She had spent a week watching and inquiring for Tom Marsden. She would loiter in the neighbourhood near the farm, and watch for him yet longer. He was sure to come now that his pretty toy was in danger; and so she hung about till the farmer, fearing for his hen-roosts, warned her off sharply.

Then she startled him by anxious inquiries about the "poor dear whose baby the sexton put in the ground last week," and said she should come to see her when she was better, and that she knew the young woman's *husband* well; and laid so much stress on the word "husband," that the farmer went indoors to his wife and said "altogether it looked queer."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ANOTHER CERTIFICATE.

But another week went by, and yet another, and no Mr. Thomas presented himself.

The village doctor came and went, and Mrs. Fernhead did all that motherly kindness could devise for the poor young creature thrown on her hands in such a strait.

And as Nelly in her delirium babbled of other names than Thomas—Tyldesley and Marsden and the mill, and "father" were ever on her lips—she agreed with her husband that it "certainly did look queer," seen in the light of Mr. Thomas's prolonged absence.

"If thah sees that woman hangin' abeawt agen, aw'd ax her what hoo knows o' Measter Tummas. Happen hoo'd let eawt summat we han a reet to know," suggested Mrs. Fernhead.

But Poll Sharrock, who knew nothing of Tom Marsden's real home, or kith or kin, and had been put blindfold, as it were, on his track by James Brown, had from that same source learned that her betrayer was himself tossing on the uneasy couch of pain: and so she relaxed her vigilant watch in Rivington Lane.

Still the Moor Farm, which held her successor in Tom Marsden's fatal favour, had a strange fascination for her, and again she bent her steps thither to ascertain whether the "pratty woife" was living or dead.

Nearly six weeks had elapsed since the terrible night of the thunderstorm; and Nelly, out of danger, though pale, sat at a little table by her open parlour window, through which came the breath of the jessamine, mignonette, and lavender, doing her best to answer Tom's first letter, to thank him for his bank note, tell him how troubled she had been by his silence, how sorry she was for his illness, and of her own recent trial, and her thought that the people of the farm looked strangely at her, and were not so friendly as they had been—though good Mrs. Fernhead had been like a mother to her whilst she was ill.

It was almost Nelly's first attempt at letter-writing, and her self-taught penmanship was not more cramped than her power to shape thought into written language. She set Tom's own letter before her as a model, and every now and then lifted her head and looked across the waving canterbury-bells and the

china-asters to a couple of yellowing beeches which stood sentry at the little wooden gate, as if to gather inspiration from a congregation of noisy linnets on their tops; or from the thistle-down, which floated over the flower-beds as indolently as if its work was over, not beginning.

She had not got beyond her second crude paragraph, when, lifting her head thus to think, she saw a big, bold-looking woman, with faded feathers and flowers, flaunting up the pathway; and had barely time to wonder who the unusual visitant might be —for she scarcely seemed a hawker or a beggar—when the woman, with more than even country freedom, walked uninvited through the open house door, and turning the handle of the parlour one, stood unabashed before her.

Instinctively Nelly rose, something like fear of the new-comer gathering over her.

"What dun yo wantn? Mrs. Fernhead's oither i' th' kitchen or shippon."

"I don't want Mrs. Fernhead—I want *you*."

"Me!"

"Yes, you!" and the woman, as if weary with long walking, deliberately seated herself opposite to Nelly, and calmly possessed herself of Tom Marsden's open letter from the table between them.

Before startled Nelly could recover her self-possession or her letter, glancing over it, she said coolly—

"So your name's Nelly, is it? An' what besides?"

"What is that to you? An' what reet han yo' to touch moi pappers?" making a snatch to recover the epistle, which failed.

"Not much to *me*, but everything to *you*," said the woman, significantly, at the same time possessing herself of the envelope also, and putting both in her pocket, regardless of Nelly's struggles to regain them.

"Mrs. Fernhead—Mrs. Fern——" screamed the frightened girl; but the woman's warning look checked the word upon her lip, and with a gasp she asked—

"Whativer dun yo' meean?"

Voices travel quickly through open windows and doors, and Mrs. Fernhead, attracted by the strange loud voice, was close at hand to answer Nelly's call.

"Who are yo'?" was her blunt interrogatory to the unattractive stranger.

"I'm Poll Sharrock," answered she, defiantly. "And now, who's this dainty madam?" she asked, pointing to Nelly, as one who had a right to be answered.

"Hoo says hoo's Mrs. Tummas?" replied the farmer's wife in some bewilderment.

"And what besides?" pursued the questioner.

"Nowt besoides as aw know on!" said Mrs. Fernhead, in increased perplexity, as she saw Nelly, still weak and pale, drop on her chair, flush and pale again, and tremble like the poplars in the lane.

"Well, then," said Poll Sharrock, "*if she's a Mrs. at all*, she's Mrs. Thomas *Marsden*, all out. But it's my belief she's no more married than I am. There!" and the woman's eyes gleamed as if to add, "Deny it, if you can?"

Mrs. Fernhead looked from one to the other, mute with amazement; but Nelly, who trembled whilst she had Tom's secret to guard, started to her feet at the aspersion, and asserting that she *was* married, boldly challenged the other to prove the contrary.

The farmer had by this time come upon the scene.

"Aw think, mi lass," said he dryly, "it's fur thee to prove that tha *art* wed."

With strength born of shame and indignation, Nelly darted through the kitchen and up the enclosed stairs to her own room, and dragging open a drawer, rushed back again with a little ornamental box which she opened with agitated fingers.

"If yo' mun see it—theer's moi marriage-loines," said she proudly, as she put a folded paper in the farmer's hands—Poll Sharrock meanwhile looking somewhat dubious and confounded.

Had she made a mistake after all?

The farmer read and stroked his chin, "Whoi, yoi, thisn seems o' reet; but—" and again he stroked his chin doubtfully, then looked at his wife.

"Meary, lass, is thisn loike yo'r marriage-loines?"

Poll Sharrock pricked up her ears. Nelly opened her eyes and mouth, panting with excitement and a vague sense of fear, as Mrs. Fernhead put her cap-borders close to her husband's whiskers, the better to examine the paper.

"Eh! Noa. Thatn's hauve black prent, an' isna hauve as big as thisns; but toimes han changed sin then, aw reckon. Mebbe thisns o' reet," said Mrs. Fernhead, compassionating Nelly's wistful look.

"Yoi, lass, steeam and whirlgig engines han torned th' world topsy-torvy sin thou an' me wor tied together. But aw say, Missis, wheere wur ta' wed? Aw dunno see the neame o' the choorch."

"We war wed at th' Register's i' Bowton; other folks get wed theere!" answered Nelly, as if on the defensive.

"Oh! hoigh! thatn's one o' th' new maks o' things. Registers!" —with contempt—"as if th' parish choorch wur na good enow. But aw reckon th' papper's o' reet, an' thah'rt an honest woman after o', i' spoight o' this brazen besom," said the farmer, handing back the certificate.

"Brazen in your teeth!" shouted Poll Sharrock, desperate at the prospect of defeat; and she clutched at the paper to read it for herself.

It was not a small printed form filled up, but an imposing-looking document, engrossed in a most approved legal hand, with abundance of old English capitals and flourishes, on a page of blue foolscap.

It ran thus:—

"Registrar's Office, Bolton.

"Whereas, Thomas Marsden, of Tyldesley-cum-Shakerley, on the one part, and Nelly Scholes, of Tyldesley-cum-Shakerley, on the other part, do jointly and severally desire, and agree, to live together, and enter upon the holy estate of matrimony, We, the aforesaid Thomas Marsden and Nelly Scholes, in the parish of Tyldesley-cum-Shakerley aforesaid, do jointly and severally agree, and promise, and bind ourselves to each other, to be lawful man and wife, from this day forth and henceforward. As witness our hands.

"* Thomas Marsden,

"* X Nelly Scholes, her mark.

"Witness—James Brown,

"Registrar's Clerk."

Poll Sharrock read it through doubtfully, until, her eye resting on the last signature, she threw it down scornfully.

"I thought as much!" said she. "That's no marriage certificate, but as bare a piece of villainy as ever two unhanged rogues hatched together. I'm sorry for thee, poor lass"—and her tone became pitiful—"but thou'rt no more Tom Marsden's wife than I am."

Here Nelly, who had listened with gasping attentions, cried in intensest agony—

"Not his wife! Oh, father!" and fell from her chair in a swoon.

The farmer and his wife appeared too dazed to stir; but Poll

Sharrock, the evil messenger of evil, lifted the poor unhappy creature from the floor, bore her to the sofa, chafed her hands, and called for water and vinegar as if she had been mistress there.

The swoon was succeeded by a prolonged fit of hysterical weeping; then the farmer's wife (having had girls of her own), not stern, but compassionate, brought the crushed girl that woman's sedative for all ills—a cup of tea; and, moreover, had the grace to place another before the disreputable stranger. She had not yet put to her husband the question she propounded some hours later, "What's to be done?" but, unwilling to add to affliction, did her best to allay it.

When Nelly Scholes, swaying to and fro like a willow in a wind, was able to listen, and Mrs. Fernhead, having drawn her batch of scorching bread from the oven, and given her orders to their strapping servant-lass, was able to listen likewise, the intruder gave, without much question, an insight into her own connection with Tom Marsden, and the motives which led her there.

She had been a barmaid five or six years previously at an inn near Ormskirk, where Tom Marsden had stopped occasionally during his Southport seasons; and being a showy, fine-looking girl, quick at repartee, she attracted his attention. He made presents to her, and made love to her at the same time. He was himself younger and less ill-favoured than he had since grown; and having more vanity than discretion, she trusted his flatteries and his promises, until, too late, she found herself dismissed from her situation in disgrace. For one short month he kept her in lodgings near Scarisbrick, midway between Ormskirk and Southport; then left her, sending her small sums of money by the hand of a lawyer's dissolute clerk, who carefully kept her ignorant of her betrayer's real home.

The following summer Tom Marsden, whom she execrated as a heartless, pitiless wretch, being again in Southport, visited her once more, and found her suffering from privations which had killed her infant. She was no longer smart, rosy, and plump; so, instead of helping, or at least commiserating her, he trumped up a foul charge against her; and, turning on his heel, left her to perish or recover as best she could. The parish buried her child, and she, penniless, homeless, friendless, without a character, soon found herself treading the downward road into which he had led her.

But the lower she sank the stronger grew her hate of her seducer, and from town to town she had tramped to search him

out—Manchester, Liverpool, Prescot, Warrington, Bolton; and there, at last, coming across the lawyer's clerk, she discovered that he also owed her betrayer a grudge, and she waited for a clue to put her on Tom Marsden's scent. And then, from a dropped word, she guessed Tom had some fresh wickedness afoot. A hint to watch the Chorley road had set her on his track, and she swore, with many an oath which made Nelly's blood run cold, to hunt him down. She said she knew that he was a rich man's son, and would never hide a woman he could own as his wife; and she determined to unmask him, and warn his second victim off the rocks she herself had split upon.

Poll's story was not a plain, condensed narrative like this, but full of passionate earnestness, of remorse, and pity, and vengeance stronger than all.

And she ended with an adjuration to Nelly to quit at once the man who had so vilely sacrificed and deceived her.

"And if you have a father, lass, go back to him and take that sham certificate, and bid him set the law at work to get such restitution as may be had."

Nelly shuddered. "I dare not," she murmured.

"Dare not!" said the other. "Dare anything but lead such a life as mine. Work, work your fingers to the bone, but keep yourself from drink and men like Thomas Marsden. And, look you, lass, you are young, and life is long, and you may wear out the shame if you only cast off the villain now, and earn your own bread honestly. I, who to my shame and sorrow took another course, tell you this, and warn you."

And then this strange woman, her two-fold mission accomplished, went forth abruptly in the deepening twilight, and Moor Farm saw her no more.

For a day or two Nelly was too ill to leave her bed, and in that time the good farmer and his wife consulted together about what was best to be done, both for their lodger and themselves.

There was nothing owing to them, and they had been well paid, according to their own moderate estimate. But they were respectable people, who could not countenance immorality. They saw clearly that Nelly had been deluded, and was the victim of a villainous plot; but—what was to be done? They could not keep her there still as a Mrs. Thomas, knowing that her marriage was a sham. If she were willing to go into service, and lead an honest life, they would send her to a married daughter who had a far-away farm, and say nothing to her disadvantage.

And so these kind-hearted, simple-minded country people resolved to act. But they waited a day or two until the young

woman, little more than seventeen, should be strong enough to bear talking to, and be sent in the tax-cart to their daughter's.

On the third day after Poll Sharrock's terrible revelation, their young lodger had been downstairs, moving about in a dreamy sort of way, and that night the Fernheads determined to make their proposition in the morning.

The morning was too late. Nelly Scholes was gone.

She had left behind a badly-written, badly-spelled, tear-stained letter to say that she was gone where *he* could never find her; that she dared not go back to her father, but she would do nothing wrong. She had about three pounds left. She had paid dearly for it, and it might keep her till she got work. And she thanked the Fernheads gratefully for not turning her out at once. But she left no message for Tom Marsden of love or of hate, forgiveness or bitterness.

She had taken with her the plainest of her clothes, so they saw she had not gone wholly unprovided; and the homely farmer and his wife, full of pity for her and indignation against him, turned to their ordinary avocations, and wondered "what next!"

Two more letters came for Mrs. Thomas, each bearing the Leigh post-mark; but as the Fernheads had not Mr. Tom's address, there they lay unopened. Two months after his former stormy visit, he rode up to the farm-gate, a wreck of a man, full of fine intentions towards Nelly, to discover, and not too smoothly, that his babe had been still-born, and was buried; that his villainy had been thoroughly exposed, and that Nelly had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"A PLEASANT SURPRISE."

To Caroline Booth's great surprise, Mr. Daniel Dent, and not her father, presented himself at their lodgings on the Esplanade, as the accredited protector of herself and Willie on the homeward journey; and but that her dear parent's kindly face would have been a more welcome sight to Caleb Booth's son and daughter than Daniel's sallow cheeks, thin lips, and cold grey eyes, there could be no manner of objection to the deputy, or the mode in which that deputy fulfilled his trust.

All care for their lodging-bill or luggage was taken off Caroline's hands, which was not always the case when she travelled with her father; and if Mr. Dent had studied (as doubtless he had) how best to win her favour, he could not have done so more effectually than in the thought and attention he bestowed on her lame brother. And not the most anxious friend could have been more assiduous in his attention to herself than he was, though something made her feel that he was no longer the mere deferential dependent, but rendered his services as a gentleman to a lady—not as a clerk to his master's daughter, as had once been the case.

They travelled by rail, and their cavalier managed to secure the sole occupancy of a first-class carriage for themselves. Thus there was no restraint on conversation; yet Caroline remarked that he decidedly avoided home topics. The objects along the line, the lodgings they had left, the botanical and other specimens William had collected during the summer, the books Miss Booth had from the library—one and all came upon the *tapis*, and appeared to have more interest than The Willows, whither Caroline's thoughts and questions turned repeatedly.

The reason was only too soon apparent.

They had found the phaeton in waiting at the station, and a light cart for their luggage—Scholes surrendering the reins of the former to Mr. Dent, whilst he took charge of the latter.

Bury Lane, sunk deep below the level of the spanning railway bridge, ran between steep banks luxuriant with seeding grasses and late wild flowers, and crowned with rugged hedges of thorn and bramble, and the downy-leaved dog-rose. But haws and hips and blackberries held the place of flowers, and through the

thinning leaves the last red beams of a crimson sunset shone upon them as they drove on in almost unbroken silence, till the banks and hedges dipped, the road took a turn, and twilight came slowly and sadly down.

As they rattled up to the gate after dusk, William exclaimed in some surprise—

"Why, Caroline, the drawing-room is lighted up! Surely father has no visitors the night we come home! He knows I do not like strangers."

The bars of green light, streaming through the Venetians, told nothing; yet Caroline felt a strange sinking of heart. What should the brilliant lighting up of that room mean? In her answer to William she put the best construction upon it.

"Perhaps, William, there may be friends, and not strangers, there to receive us, and father may wish to give us a more than usual welcome home after our long absence."

"In my opinion, our old parlour's the best place to welcome us in—that is home-like. The drawing-room is so new; it seems to me all finery and frigidity," remarked William—adding, "I never am comfortable in it."

"I think," observed Mr. Dent, as he helped Caroline to alight, "that your good father has a pleasant surprise for you, Miss Booth;" and he turned from her to assist William, leaving her thoughts to fly off at a tangent to Frederick, and the possibility of his unexpected return.

It was nothing half so agreeable.

The hall door was thrown open as they approached, and in the light of the lamp she saw her father standing with a lady on his arm, richly dressed in silver-grey satin.

She had barely time to observe that her father was no longer in mourning, and that the lady was Miss Dent, their housekeeper. Then the heartiness of his parental embrace drove the first impression from her thought; but the gay gowns and cap-ribbons of Jane and Becka, who waited in the background to shake hands with "young Missis," again struck her with an uncomfortable sense of change.

The soft, silver-grey dress led the way, without a rustle, down the passage between the morning-room and kitchen, to the drawing-room where the chandeliers were alight and the chairs uncovered to receive them.

Along with a ham and a cold tongue, potted meat, cakes, and jam, glass and silver glittered on the table; and to Caroline's surprise—for it seemed wholly unnecessary—a new and costly china tea-service.

Caroline had taken all this in at a glance before William's nimble crutch (he had grown stronger at the seaside), which followed them, had passed from the noisy oilcloth to the noiseless carpet.

She had shaken hands quietly with the wearer of the silver-grey satin in the hall, and was about to ask why this special note of preparation, when a new greeting from that strangely radiant individual caused Caroline to expand her full brown eyes and throw up her head in amazement.

"We are glad to have you home again, Caroline!"

"Caroline!" Did she hear aright? Could that be Miss Dent making so free with her Christian name?

"And William too," continued the lady, advancing with both hands to take his.

Caroline looked at her father, as if to ask the meaning of this familiarity. He was intent on the satin dress, and playing nervously with the seals dangling from his watch-chain.

Between her desire to check the housekeeper's advances and her unwillingness to hurt Miss Dent's feelings, she hesitated how to reply.

Acting on a sudden resolve to ignore the former, she said, with quiet dignity—

"Miss Dent, I will trouble you to ring the bell for Becka. She can bring in the urn, whilst I go to my room to remove my outer garments."

Miss Dent's hand made no move towards the bell, but her voice caused Caroline, on her way to the door, to turn again—not because Daniel Dent was on the threshold.

"Caleb, did you hear that? Have you not acquainted our dear Caroline?" (She knew that he had not.)

Caroline gasped, and William stood amazed. What was coming now?

"Caroline and William, my dears, I thought," somewhat stammered Mr. Booth—"I thought Mr. Dent would have told you;" and, taking the hand of Daniel's sister, he presented her to them. "My dears, we are married; this is your moth—— Mrs. Booth!"

The involuntary check he made in uttering the word "mother" was its own commentary on that inauspicious marriage.

"Mother—Mrs. Booth!" echoed Caroline and William simultaneously, in tones which certainly expressed anything but satisfaction.

"Yes, my children," again spoke Mr. Booth; "we have

been married a fortnight. I thought Mr. Dent would have told you. We did not send for you on the occasion, as we thought a quiet wedding best at our time of life."

Caroline had sunk on a settee, and, with her face hidden in her hands, was sobbing violently.

"Oh, my mother—my poor, dear, dead mother—are you so soon forgotten?" had been her first involuntary utterance before that flood of tears came as a protest against the bridal.

William's lip quivered tremulously. Leaning on his crutch with one arm, his other stole round his sister's neck, and bringing his pale face near to hers, yet shadowed by her black bonnet, he whispered—

"Never mind, Caroline; you and I will never forget our own mother; nor our Uncle Ralph either! Hush, Carry, dear."

But Caroline's emotion was not to be stilled by a whisper. Her whole frame shook with her convulsive sobbing. Besides the insult to her dead mother's memory, a world of treachery and deceit had been unveiled by that announcement from her father's lips. Mrs. Marsden's far-seeing caution came back to her with redoubled force—Miss Dent had indeed "taken too much off her hands." That "summer at the seaside" had been the suggestion of no kind friend, but a wily woman, who wanted a clear field for her own schemes. Caroline saw it all, and how her father had been duped. Not for one moment did she suspect him of premeditated deceit—she knew him to be incapable of that; but she also knew that he lacked strength of purpose, and was easily led. Thus her tears fell not only over the graves of the past, but for the anticipated future. And if ever she longed for Frederick's presence to sustain her, it was then.

Won over by Miss Dent's skilful and delicate attention to his diseased limb, and his little wants during his sister's illness and absence, William had long lost sight of Frederick Marsden's warning about "cats;" and looking at the marriage from the standpoint of his mother's ten months' grave, he regarded it more as premature than as unfit. His father was by no means an old man, and the new Mrs. Booth's thirty-one or two years did not seem very disproportionate to the bridegroom's fifty.

As William still bent caressingly over his sister, and Mr. Booth looked on dumbfounded, nervously fingering the seals pendent by a chain from a watch worn in an old-fashioned fob, his new wife clung to his arm on the soft hearthrug, as if needing protection, every line in her colourless face saying meekly—

"What have I done to deserve this?"

Mr. Dent had left the room.

Presently Mr. Booth broke the uncomfortable silence by the deprecatory observation—

"My dears, I thought I was really acting for the best. You could not expect me to remain a solitary widower all my life; and who so fit to take matronly charge of my son and daughter as she who smoothed your own dear mother's last hours, and won her dying blessing?"

(Ah, deluded Mr. Booth!)

"Carry, I think you are giving your father pain, and—*her* too," William sorrowfully whispered low in his sister's ear; but even he could not frame his speech to give the new wife a name.

A choking and a gurgling in Caroline's throat answered this appeal in the effort she made to command herself. She rose, put her hand into her father's, and said in broken accents—

"It has come—upon me—so suddenly. I may see it—differently—in time. I hope it *may* be—for the best, and—that you may be happy;" then gathering round her the travelling shawl which had fallen loose, she turned away and left the room, unable to say one word of greeting or conciliation to her beloved mother's successor.

In the large hall she encountered Mr. Dent, who had evidently been waiting for her. His countenance wore an expression of sympathy and commiseration.

"Miss Booth," he began, respectfully, extending his hand, of which she took no notice, "believe me, I have been no party to this marriage. I was taken as much by surprise as you have been, when the subject was first mooted to me some three weeks back. I counselled Harriet not to accept Mr. Booth's flattering offer, as being likely to create disunion in the family—a result I should most certainly deplore."

Caroline's heart was too full to heed his apologetic disclaimer; she made a gesture as if she would pass on. He placed himself in her path so that she could not pass without absolute rudeness.

"Indeed, Miss Booth," he went on, "so fearful was I that you might be adverse to the marriage, and so reluctant to give possible pain, that I could not bring myself to break the news to you, as I think had been expected I should."

He spoke with an air of sincerity that would have convinced any unprejudiced person; but Caroline was not unprejudiced. She cared too little for him to be concerned about the share he had taken in promoting her father's marriage with his sister, and she was in no mood to discuss the question; one thing, however, she remembered, and, drawing herself up with some little dignity, said—

"Yet, sir, you spoke of a '*pleasant* surprise' awaiting me. I do not reconcile that with your present statement. Permit me to pass, sir; I am fatigued and troubled, and would fain seek composure in the solitude of my own room!"

He made way with a deep obeisance. She stopped for an instant at the kitchen door to ask Becka for a chamber candle, and left him to wonder whether he had or had not made a first advance into her favour.

The bell rang for the tea-urn, and Mr. Dent went back to the drawing-room; but no Caroline made her appearance.

The new wife, with a great show of magnanimity and amiability, took her place at the tea-table, made herself agreeable to William, and, to prove how forgiving and kind a stepmother she was, sent a daintily-arranged tea-tray up to the less amiable young lady, with the message that perhaps Miss Booth might be too fatigued to return to the drawing-room, and would prefer her tea upstairs.

And it is a fact that that little act of attention and deference to wounded feelings did more to close a breach, and reconcile Caroline to the marriage, than any elaborate speech could have effected.

She remarked, too, that her chamber had been arranged for her coming with faultless care, and found on inspecting William's that the same attention had been bestowed on his accommodation; and Caroline was wiser than to accredit either rough-headed Becka or Ann with the neat-handed preparations.

This observation came with the morrow: she could not master herself sufficiently to quit her room or join the family downstairs that night. An apology, with Becka for her mouthpiece, was all she could concede.

Mr. Dent had remained to take a hand at a game of whist; but soon after Becka delivered her set speech he withdrew, and was followed to the door by his sister, who took him to task for neglecting to break the news to Caroline.

"You had no business, Daniel, to let the girl come home quite unprepared. I don't wonder it upset her. You know you were sent to Southport on purpose."

"Now, look you, Harriet," he answered. "I have helped you to your position, and don't you interfere with me on my way to mine. If she loves you no better than I think, she would never forgive me for being the bearer of ill-tidings. I had no notion of making my first step a false one."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LURKING AMONG FLOWERS.

CAROLINE accepted the new wife much as we do accept the inevitable. For the sake of the father whom she loved dearly, she made no outward demonstration of resentment; but not the less she regarded the marriage as a calamity, and the stepmother as an intruder.

In the latter particular, Leigh society must have been pretty much of Miss Booth's opinion, the second Mrs. Booth was so generally ignored. This was long before the "No cards" epoch; but Miss Dent had suggested to Caleb—

"Perhaps we had better not have any wedding cards. I should not like your friends to think I was pushing myself forward, Mr. Booth; and they might, you know. It is not everyone who would so generously overlook the discrepancy in our position as you have done."

"You are quite right, my dear, as you always are. I do not know whether your good sense or your modesty is most to be admired."

And so there were "No cards."

But modesty and humility had less to do with the matter than diplomacy. She was shrewd enough to know that a wedding-ring and a wedding-card, and a new name, could not transform Miss Dent, dressmaker and housekeeper, into Mrs. Booth, a visitable acquaintance for the manufacturing gentry of the locality. She could imagine the contempt and indignation which would greet the paste-board in houses where she had quietly fitted on bodices and measured off skirts in pursuance of her calling. And she foresaw that the friends of Caroline's own mother would cling closer to the young girl now if only out of pity; and so she hoped to edge herself in amongst them by degrees; all the sooner for delicately keeping in the background.

This was a slower process than the second Mrs. Booth had anticipated. The announcement of the marriage seemed to have scared even Caroline's friends from The Willows; but the serenity of the placid bride was not apparently disturbed thereby.

Sophia Marsden was the first to break the ice.

Discussing the visiting question with her mother, she said, with an impressive rise of her shoulders—

"Since our Emma's escapade, my dear mother, we of all people have least reason to resent a mésalliance. I don't suppose I shall like Mrs. Booth number two one bit better than I did Miss Dent; there is too much of the pussy-cat about her to suit my taste; but both John and I think it would be cruel to desert Caroline now, lest pussy should show her claws in resentment. I mean to be wonderfully gracious to the ex-housekeeper, for the sake of my dear Carry!"

"You are quite right, my love; Caroline may want a true friend. I warned her long ago against the advances of Miss Dent; but I suppose the woman of the world was too much for the young and unsophisticated country girl."

"Ah, mother, I may thank my stars for the little peep I had into the great world with my aunt for chaperon!"

"Thank God, my dear, that it was only a 'little peep;' a larger one might have sent you home less loveable than you are."

"Perhaps so," she assented, adding, "I wonder what the Ogre would say to that? I've an idea he does not think me too loveable as it is. By-the-by, I'm curious to know what secret attraction draws Tom to Leigh so often. Birds of a feather flock together, and the raven and crow have equally black pinions. I don't think Tom a very desirable acquaintance; but preserve us all from the parrot-nose, leaden eyes, receding forehead, and thin straight lips of Mr. Daniel Dent!"

As may be supposed from this conversation, Sophia and the Rev. John were just sufficiently gracious to the new wife to place her at her ease, and prevent her visiting on Caroline the disrespect of Caroline's friends; the curate having held the lady in considerable mistrust ever since the late Mrs. Booth's spasmodic attack in the morning room, when Miss Eckersley also was present; albeit he had taken himself to task for a lack of Christian charity anent his suspicions whensoever they recurred.

Of course, the two dear young friends who had been separated all the summer had a long chat in Caroline's own room, in which the Rev. John and the absent Frederick figured so largely that there was little space left for discourse on the recent marriage, although they contrived to arrive at each other's sentiments on the subject before they separated.

"What does William think about her?" asked Sophia, as they were about to leave the chamber.

"Oh, she is so attentive to him, he has long ceased to regard her as an interloper!"

"Well, I hope her velvet paws won't scratch him in the long run," answered Sophia, as they opened the door, and beheld

Mrs. Booth gliding towards her own room at the far corner of the square landing.

As Caroline shook hands with Sophia and the curate on the door-step, Scholes passed the gate, a down-cast, gloomy, embittered aspect in his worn features and bent form.

"Oh, Sophy," cried Caroline, "do you know if Scholes has heard anything of his lost daughter? I feel quite sorry for the poor fellow; he always looks so miserable and disconsolate."

Sophia flushed slightly. The question took her unawares. Suspicions were not certainties, and Tom, however unbrotherly, *was* her brother. She shook her head.

"I fear he never will hear anything of her again; or, if he does, only what will give him fresh pain."

The friends separated—the tall curate offering his arm to Sophia, "just to see her through Atherton Park."

He had observed her flush at Caroline's casual query, and with a lover's very natural desire to interpret such a sign on his fair lady's face, he re-introduced the subject of Scholes and his grief as they walked along.

For some time Sophia had felt Tom's secrets burdensome, and had longed to share them with her betrothed; he had therefore no very difficult task before him in ascertaining that her blushes were for her brother and his ill-doings. And then they took solemn counsel together, he promising to seek out deluded Nelly, and reclaim her if it were possible.

But the clue he held was too slight, even if Nelly had not vanished from the Moor Farm.

Before the week was out, and the hollyhock and the dwarf-mallow had shown their last September flowers, and whilst the sweet scent of mignonette yet lingered in the air, Caroline was fated to hear more of Scholes's daughter than she had dreamed when she had put her chance question to Sophia Marsden.

Caroline was in her own bedroom, sitting by the muslin-draped toilet table at the large window, with the treasured portrait of Frederick Marsden in her hand, her dreamy eyes looking out over the yellowing tree-tops with that far-away look which tells of a mind abstracted and sightless sight. The sun was setting in a glorious crimson and opal sky, the singing swallows had sought their nests, and the swarming ants and wasps had found for their tribes fresh habitations.

A light knock at the door, twice repeated, failed to break upon her reverie; a sharper and louder tap caused her to start, look round, and say, "Come in."

And in came, quietly attired, Mrs. Booth, with manner as reposeful as her garb.

"I have a small box here for you, my dear," she said (always affectionate in her terms). "It has been sent on from Liverpool by private hand. Daniel has just brought it in from the works."

With a sudden exclamation, Caroline had darted round her bed, and had the box in her hands before her stepmother had finished her sentence.

It was round, firm, and shaped like a common chip salve-box, with an over-fitting lid, made, too, of some light, shiny foreign wood, so flexible, yet so tough, it had borne bending round and overlapping to receive the wooden pegs which held its sides and discs together. It was not more than a foot in diameter and half a foot in depth. The label containing the address had been pasted on the lid; but the only fastening was an elaborately-knotted cord, which Caroline's trembling fingers in vain sought to untie.

"Permit me, my dear," said the new wife, graciously; "you are too agitated to unfasten so complex a knot." And, setting Caroline aside, she calmly proceeded to unfasten it, twist by twist, rejecting Caroline's proposition to cut it as the quickest method, and somehow it seemed to undo very readily in her hands—not as though the cord had been pressed tight and flat during a long voyage. But Caroline had no eyes to perceive this; her sole thought was to get at the contents.

Ah, how eager we all are to precipitate fate!

And now the young girl would gladly have dispensed with her stepmother's presence, but she was no longer a housekeeper to be dismissed at will, and lingered as if there could be no privacy between herself and her husband's child.

Caroline felt differently. To her there was something sacred in that wooden case from the other side of the world; and to open it at all in the presence of a third person was little less than profanation. Yet her own impatience would not permit her to set it aside to be examined at a more fitting opportunity.

She raised the closely-fitting lid, within which a letter had been secured with a tin-tack, to preserve the delicate contents of the box from crushing. Had there been no one near, she would have snatched at that the first, and rained a storm of kisses on the paper. It needed all her self-control to let it lie while she lifted the thin paper from the clustering flowers beneath, gorgeous with the tints of nature. There were wreaths and sprays of scarlet and of azure, with leaves of brilliant green, all made

from the gay feathers of Brazilian birds; and coiled at the bottom, as if to greet her with its hope and promise, when her first flush of admiration was exhausted, lay a delicate wreath of orange blossom.

"Oh, how lovely—how superb!" had been her ejaculations, as she drew forth first the blue and then the scarlet flowers, the like of which had never met her sight before, and laid them on the coverlet. But at the first glimpse of these symbolical white blossoms, with their golden hearts, a delicate blush suffused her cheeks; and without bringing them forth to the gaze of her unwelcome companion, she was hurriedly closing the silver paper over them to shut them from too curious eyes, when her hand was arrested by a touch and a word from her stepmother.

"Stay, Caroline, dear. There is something more valuable than flowers in that box. I am almost sure I caught the glitter and sparkle of jewellery."

Thus addressed, Caroline could do no less than uncover the flowers, to show that the new wife was mistaken. Sure enough there was something glittering at the bottom of the box, and on drawing out the exquisite wreath, she found a *solitary earring* entangled in one of the blossoms.

"How it glitters!" she cried. "They must be Brazilian diamonds!"

And as she released the wire before searching amongst the paper for its fellow, she thought—

"How foolish of my darling Fred, when he had so little money, to spend it in expensive jewellery for me! I should love him quite as well without."

But her search amongst the paper produced no second earring. She emptied the box. There was nothing there.

The dull grey eye of Harriet Booth followed her every movement with a singular expression in their haze, the pupils expanding and contracting like those of a cat about to spring on an unsuspecting mouse or bird.

"Dear me! there is only one," murmured Caroline, as if communing with herself. "I have not surely dropped it," and she shook each spray of flowers, and was stooping to examine the carpet, when again the stepmother intervened.

"Only one, did you say? How very singular!"

"Very!" echoed Caroline, in a disconcerted manner. "I hope I have not lost so valuable a gift" (it was not market value the true-hearted girl meant); and again she felt on the carpet by the bedside.

"Only one!" repeated Harriet Booth. "It is really very

peculiar. Would you mind letting me look at the earring?" and she held out her hand.

Caroline laid the earring upon it.

The grey eyes dilated; she seemed like one aghast.

"What is the matter?" asked Caroline, simply.

"Oh, my dear Caroline, this is a very remarkable coincidence. I hope it is nothing more; but it really is very remarkable!" and a look of mingled pity and pain seemed to sadden the grey face of the speaker.

"Whatever do you mean? What is so remarkable? That one earring is lost?" interrogated Caroline, in some perplexity, and, it may be added, some faint shadowing of alarm.

"No, my dear—far from that. I am only afraid that an earring is *found*, not lost."

"*Found, not lost!* You speak in enigmas. Whatever *do* you mean?" inquired Caroline, as if on the very tenter-hooks of suspense.

More pitiful grew the treacherous face, as with every word she uttered she froze a pulse of joy. "My dear child, do not distress yourself until we are certain. I hope it may be *only* a coincidence."

"Certain of what!" exclaimed Caroline, impetuously. "I wish you would speak out."

She spoke out.

"Well, dear, I believe you are aware that *Nelly Scholes left an earring behind her, and that her father found it.*"

"Yes, I think I have heard something of it. But what of that?" asked the bewildered young girl, breathlessly.

"The earring in your hand" (she had given it back) "is as like that of Nelly Scholes's as two pins! I am afraid it is the very *fellow earring!*" and her voice sank to a mysterious whisper.

"Nonsense, Mrs. Booth! That is preposterous. How could Fred Marsden, away in Australia, have Nelly Scholes's earring?" and Caroline's lip curled in disdain; but the curled lip quivered with a sickening jealous fear as the answer fell like ice upon her heart.

"Certainly—not unless Nelly Scholes was away with him in Australia too."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THORNS.

For a moment Caroline stood rigid, as from the touch of a torpedo. She blanched to her very lips. Then love, and memory, and reason came to her aid, and she repelled the aspersion on her lover with passionate earnestness.

"How dare you—how dare you insinuate so vile a calumny! It only proves how little you know of Frederick Marsden. And do I need remind you that he sailed quite three months before that girl disappeared?" and Caroline drew herself up proudly, as she put the question in vindication of her lover's honour.

But the subtle individual at her elbow was prepared for this. Equable and unruffled in demeanour, she replied—

"You are too hasty, Caroline. I quite appreciate your spirited defence of the absent; but do not care to be myself misunderstood. Remember, I came into this house a stranger from a distance, barely three days before the young man ran away from home. Rumour and analogy are all on which I can base conjecture."

"And very insufficient grounds," responded Caroline, indignantly, plucking at the tufts of the counterpane as she spoke.

"Perhaps not, my dear," said her stepmother, calmly. "But you had better sit down while I explain myself—you tremble all over with agitation;" and she placed a chair for Caroline, who was glad of the support, herself remaining standing in the faint shadow of the dimity curtains, and talking all the while.

"You see, my dear, there are generally faults on both sides, and when young gentlemen run away from home we may take it for granted there are reasons which do not always come to the surface."

"Fred had reason enough in his father's ill-usage," promptly put in Caroline.

"That might be *his* version, my dear," dryly observed the other.

"But Sophy and his mother say the same," was the defensive answer.

That was information for Mrs. Booth. A peculiar motion of the dust-coloured head accompanied the "I see. Partisanship in a disunited family! Who shall know what side to believe?

—the men, speaking with masculine knowledge, who call him 'disobedient,' 'indolent,' 'wild,' and a 'vagabond?' or the feminine, known to be ever most attached to the scapegrace of the family?"

Caroline was silent. Harriet went on with fluency, very unusual to her—

"But, my dear Caroline, do not let me bias you in any way." (As if she were not doing it!) "It is certainly possible that Mr. Frederick may have had some entanglement with this girl, and run away to avoid her, and she have followed him; or he may not have sailed at the time he represented, and the birds may have flown together (as I have heard they did). But all this is mere conjecture, called up by an odd earring; and very likely, after all, the letter may explain its presence amongst those lovely flowers, of which I quite envy you. Perhaps you would rather read your love-letter in private, so I'll leave you. But don't be downcast; it may be things are better than they seem."

She went quietly, as she came; but, like the first serpent in the first Paradise, she had desolated Eden.

Never again could Caroline Booth rely wholly and unreservedly on her lover. Strong as was her love and her faith, the "little leaven" of doubt had been introduced; and who should stop its action?

They were not tears of joy which fell upon the letter so long before she dared to open it; and even the loving, sanguine words made their way less surely to her heart. But as she read of suffering at sea, of the *Laura* beating about for three days without a galley to cook their food, or a rudder to steer by, reaching Melbourne only by a miracle, her feelings got the better of her doubts, and she rained kisses on the paper, as if to dry the previous tears.

It went on to tell, with many a grateful phrase, how, to Fred's extreme surprise, Captain Dambrill had handed him fifty pounds, before he went ashore, on behalf of Mr. Booth (to whom he sent his thanks), and how it had strengthened him to persevere and show himself worthy of the trust.

But there was nothing said of any earring enclosed with the flowers, and the omission perplexed her.

Fred's letter was at variance with deceit or wrong-doing; she could not think the earring could have been Nelly's. But the very doubt troubled her; and her stepmother took care to water the root she had planted.

Moreover, Harriet Booth cautiously impressed upon her the

necessity for silence respecting her discovery, lest it should come to the knowledge of Scholes and the vindictive man should follow Frederick Marsden murderously.

The *Laura* had also brought a letter of thanks to Mr. Booth, and a long epistle to Mrs. Marsden, recounting her son's adventures at sea, and his gratitude for the welcome funds Captain Dambrill held in store for him; a brief description of Melbourne, and the glowing accounts received from Ballarat, whither he was about to proceed with a partner he had picked up—a Mr. Pipe, from Manchester.

Of course this letter passed through the hands of the Rev. John Hay to Mrs. Marsden, but it previously passed through the Leigh post-office; and as Mr. Caleb Booth's manager pretty generally managed to be in the way when the letters were sorted for morning delivery—after taking the bleacher's letters to the works himself, to "save the postman the trouble"—it came about that Mr. Thomas Marsden was ere long apprised of the clerical envoy his brother Frederick had found.

It had long been a puzzle to Tom how his mother and sister contrived to sustain his brother's absence so philosophically, and how it was he heard so few anxious yearnings for tidings of the wanderer.

"Ho! ho!—that's it, is it?" drawled Tom, with a complete fusillade of cracks from his bony finger-joints; adding, for the benefit of his informant, "Then I think the sooner we stop that caper the better!"—an observation which met with Mr. Daniel Dent's full acquiescence.

Very wonderful to see was the friendship growing up between Mr. Tom and Mr. Daniel, who contrived to drop in upon each other at the bleach-works, or the cotton mill, or the Flaming Castle, and might be seen walking arm-in-arm after business hours with a frequency which boded no good to others.

They often found their way together to the Booths' drawing-room, which the new wife did not keep for state occasions, when Mr. Dent distinguished himself by his delicate attentions to Caroline, and Mr. Tom rallied her on her melancholy; on the folly of wearing the willow for a lover at the Antipodes, who had, in all probability, consoled himself with a fresh sweetheart where he was; and, half banteringly, advised her to do the same, telling her that he and Mr. Dent were, either or both, ready to throw themselves at her feet.

Caroline bore it as well as she could, generally taking refuge at the piano, where the battle between loyalty and doubt going on in her heart caused her to select songs and melodies so

sentimentally sad, that even her father took up the thread of raillery when they laid it down.

He, since his marriage, had surrendered much more power into his manager's hands, was much much frequently at home with his favourite hobby, and just at the time was all engrossed with the arrangement of the wild flowers, mosses, and seaweeds William had collected so perseveringly in the neighbourhood of Southport. For this purpose he set aside his experiments with the tassels of the cotton-grass, bushels of which had been gathered for him both on Chat Moss and Carrington Moss when they were in full blow in June.

Now, too, thorns began to grow out of the Rev. John Hay's pulpit cushion, and to bristle around the pathway of his love. Anonymous letters, purporting to emanate from parishioners, or members of the congregation—all in disparagement of the hitherto unimpeachable curate—found their way to the vicar. There were objections to his ministry, to his orthodoxy, to his manner, to his lack of zeal, to his oratory—any one of which alone might have served as an apple of discord, but heaped, as it were, in a bushel, overwhelmed the vicar, shook his confidence in his curate, occasioned heart-burnings in the congregation and between the two clerics; and finally ended, as might be anticipated, in the resignation of the indignant curate—in time to prevent dismissal.

Simultaneously with this shower of anti-clerical bullets, a treacherous arrow was shot through the post-office into Simeon Marsden's hands as he sat in his counting-house pondering a weighty project his partner Tom laid before him.

But schemes for blending spinning and weaving gave way before the yarn spun in that manufactory of mischief—the irritating letter in his hand. In a towering passion he got off his high stool, and, as fast as his legs would carry him, hurried across the road—to find the Rev. John Hay there before him.

He had come to acquaint Sophia with his inability to find Nelly Scholes, though he had searched all the purlieus of Bolton and its environs, questioning alike curates, Scripture readers, hucksters, and policemen, leaving no stone unturned. Yet the report of his unsuccessful mission was only one of his errands to Tyldesley that brown October afternoon.

If his ministerial career in Leigh was about to close, a fresh cure had been offered to him in Manchester, in one of its most densely-populated districts, where there was a wider field for the good man's labours.

But he was loth to go thither alone, and had been endeavouring

to persuade Sophia to leave mother and father, and to take him for better or worse, and was in the act of crossing the hall to acquaint Mr. Marsden with his prospects and wishes when the latter came with long strides up the drive, without his thick drab overcoat, and, contrary to custom, announced his presence and his passion by a thundering peal at the front door.

His hand was still on the great knocker when the door opened for him as if by some magic, and he stood to face to face with the Rev. John Hay.

No contrast could have been more complete. The one—tall, pale, slim, grave, composed, and gentlemanlike on the upper step, looked calmly down on the big, burly, blustering, red-faced, angry, vulgar man, whose features and fingers were alike on the work with passion.

He had a cane in the one hand, an open letter in the other, and it rustled in his grip.

"Oh, thah't here, are ta?—thah sneaking pale-faced parson! I've caught thee, have I?" he exclaimed, handling the cane as if his fingers quivered to lay it about the curate's shoulders.

The curate stepped back to make way for his entrance (which was so rude that, but for that backward step, he might have lost his balance), quietly answering him as he moved aside—

"Yes, sir, I am here; and was at the door on my way to your counting-house when you yourself knocked. But I prefer speaking to you under this roof."

"Oh, thah dost, dost ta? An' I've something to say to thee, thah flock-faced fortune-hunter, after thah's done!"

A slight flush crossed his pale face.

"Father, how can you!" exclaimed Sophia, in pain for her lover's wounded honour.

Before the curate could reply or interpose, Simeon Marsden took hold of Sophia by both shoulders and shook her roughly.

"How can I, thah brazen minx! Read that, and see what folk have to say of thee, afore thah dare to speak to me again!"—and releasing her with a jerk, he threw the crushed letter at her feet, just as Mrs. Marsden, roused from an afternoon nap by the commotion, descended the stairs, and Ann showed her astonished face at the distant kitchen door.

The jerk would have thrown Sophia against her mother but that the curate's arm was ready; and he caught her, drawing her to him proudly, as something precious needing his protection.

Mrs. Marsden picked up the letter, while Mr. Hay, mindful of the listening Ann, drew his trembling Sophia within the

parlour door, not caring to make his private affairs matters for a servant's gossip; not that he was silent at the time.

"Stop, Mr. Marsden!" he had cried. "I cannot permit that! Miss Marsden is my promised wife, and not even her father shall lay rough hands on her in my presence."

What a grateful look Mrs. Marsden gave him! Her daughter had found a fitting champion at last.

Mr. Marsden stood for a moment confounded by the curate's authoritative manner and his own overmastering rage.

Mr. Hay took advantage of the pause. Still keeping Sophia within his shielding arm, he said, with the calm dignity which so well became him—

"I know not what that letter may contain, sir—many *honourable* epistles have been flying about of late; but I do know this, that I am no fortune-hunter, and that I seek your daughter for her dear self only. Give me Sophia, and you can do with your money what you please."

Simeon Marsden fairly spluttered with passion. In his effort to say many things at once, he got out nothing but a jumble of broken sentences, the gist of which Mr. Hay took to mean that the spinner thought him a liar, a sneak, a hypocrite, and a decided fortune-hunter—in spite of his protest, and that he distinctly refused his consent.

"What care I for your cloth!" roared he. "Do you think that I am going to give my lass and her nine thousand pounds to any beggarly curate? Not I."

"Nine thousand pounds?" echoed the curate, indignantly. "What do you mean, sir?"

"That's what I mean, sir!" and Marsden, snatching the dirty crumpled letter from his trembling wife's hands, thrust it almost in the other's face. "I owe that insult to sneaking vagabonds like you!"

The curate had his temper well under control. He had learned to confront choler with calmness; but his patience was sorely tried that day. It was a clinging arm and a whispered "Dear John" which restrained him.

The letter, ill-spelled and badly written, was as follows:—

"Mestur Marsden,

"When mi lass run away, yo telt me i shud ha' tuk better kare on her, an' yo larfed at me. Luk a whoam, owd chap; yo han had two runaways a'reddy, and t'other's like to foller with the parson chap as hangs about after yore dowter's brass. Who'll larf when Miss Sophy cuts off wi' th' lung-shanked kurate,

and he grabs her nine thousand pounds? Yo'n larf o' th' rung soide o' th' mouth, ode skin-flint—an sarve yo reet."

There was no name attached, but that the epistle purported to emanate from Scholes was evident. The Rev. John had seen too many anonymous missives lately to be greatly troubled by this one. Yet the reference to the nine thousand pounds puzzled him. He calmly folded and put it in his pocket, looking steadily at Mr. Marsden, and said—

"Until I find the writer, I keep this slanderous document. It is a forgery, sir. Scholes cannot write."

"He might get some one to write for him," promptly responded Mr. Marsden.

"He bears me no ill-will, Mr. Marsden; and I scarcely think has the knowledge of your private affairs which this letter would import. What nine thousand pounds are referred to?"

Simeon set up a great horse-laugh, and sat down, for the first time, to indulge his mirth.

"Hearken to him, Marion—as if *he* didn't know! The innocent, disinterested pastor! Humph! I've no patience with such hypocrisy!"

Sophia came to her slandered lover's defence; but she spoke to him, and not to her father, both of whose feelings when she ended may be better imagined than described.

"John, dear!" (she did not seem to care who heard), "I am afraid I have done wrong in keeping you so long in the dark. But I meant to give you a pleasant surprise on our wedding-day. The dear old aunt who brought me up left me nine thousand pounds, payable on my marriage or my twenty-second birthday!"

"What!" John Hay looked petrified. He felt as if he must resign Sophia or his honour.

"Yes, John, dear; I shall not be twenty-two until St. Thomas's Day; but I am of age now, and the sum of nine thousand pounds is yours any day you like to take me with it! I blush for the father who has so grossly insulted you!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FORTUNE-HUNTER.

THE struggle in the curate's breast between love and pride (which he called honour) was sharp and strong.

For a moment he strained the generous girl to his tortured heart, pressed a passionate kiss on her forehead; then, releasing her, turned to the window, dropped into a chair, and looking out, passed his long, shapely hand across his forehead in pain and perplexity.

His pale face grew white, his emotions seemed to choke him. Fain would Mrs. Marsden have spoken, but she dared not in the presence of her tyrant.

"John," whispered Sophia, going to him and laying her hand on his shoulder, while Simeon Marsden looked on in dazed bewilderment—"John, what is the matter? You surely do not think me too bold?"

"Too bold, darling! No; too generous only. But oh, Sophy, why did I not know of this barrier before?"

"Barrier?" she faltered.

"Yes, barrier. How can I—already branded as a fortune-hunter—disgrace my lineage by claiming you as mine? I should be said to clutch your money-bags."

All this was in undertone; but Simeon's sharp ears were open, and his eyes open too. How any man in his senses could call nine thousand pounds a barrier to his acceptance of the woman he so dearly loved was quite beyond his narrow-minded comprehension. Before he recovered from his surprise, the curate, white as his own neckcloth, rose, and still holding Sophia's hand convulsively in his, said, in a strangely unnatural voice—

"Mr. Marsden, I pardon your insulting language to myself. You had, or thought you had, some foundation for your wrath. Had I earlier known of your daughter's expectations, I might have been less presumptuous in mine. I feel I ought in honour—resign my pretensions—to——"

"John—John, do not say so—you will break my heart!" cried Sophia, releasing her hand, and throwing herself on his breast in a passion of pain, forgetful or regardless of conventionalities.

"The parson's right, Sophy—and a better man than I thought

him!" shouted her father, half in admiration of a disinterestedness so much beyond his own strength.

"Sophia, my love, do you hear what your father says?" murmured John Hay, bending his lips to her beautiful ear. "Do not add to my torture! I never loved you so passionately as now that I feel bound in honour to release you. Forgive me, love, but I must go home and think."

"But you will not give me up, John, because of my money?" she whispered.

"I will pray for guidance, Sophia. You shall hear from me, or see me again, before I leave."

The Rev. John Hay, feeling himself the sport of vindictive demons, gave Sophia tenderly to her mother's care, and, with a bow to Mr. Marsden, left the house, to encounter at the gate Tom, who gave him an unheeded nod in passing, and looked after him with a sinister leer, which spoke volumes.

And Sophia—gay, lively, sportive Sophia—left behind, threw herself on the sofa in a burst of uncontrollable grief; feeling her nine thousand pounds as so many golden weights to drag her down to the depths of desolation.

A fortnight of unmitigated torture to both followed, during the first week of which Tom was maliciously exuberant over Sophia's melancholy; but Ann, whose occasional tiffs with Jim sharpened her natural acuteness, gave Sophia a useful hint.

"Eh, but aw say, Miss Sophia, if aw wur yo, aw woudna let Mester Tom see me a-frettin'. He's as pleased as Punch to see yo deawncast and malancholy; an if aw wur yo, awd just brisk up, however bad aw felt, just to spite him, that aw would!"

The rough woman's well-meant advice acted as a stimulant on Sophia, though not precisely as intended. She was naturally so blithesome, and covered up her cares so well, that she thought it was quite time to throw off her "doleful dumps" when the domestic began to comment on them. It, moreover, awaked her to notice how anxiously her mother's eye followed her, and she took herself to task for selfish sorrow, and sedulously determined to overcome it.

So worthy an effort never was wholly lost. She became cheerful in her attempts to appear so. And then she took a step, thoroughly her own, to rectify the wrong.

She wrote to the Rev. John Hay; although he had not again set foot in the rich man's mansion, lest it should appear conclusive that he was wooing the heiress.

She found a trustworthy courier for her billet in Haigh,

who was ever ready to serve Fred Marsden's sister, and thus it ran:—

"Tyldesley Banks, October 18, 185—.

"DEAR JOHN,

"I am not quite sure that you deserve a letter from me; but if we got no more than we deserve we should get very little good, and I mean to give you some very good advice. I have sent this by Haigh, the cabinet-maker, my brother Fred's trusty friend, not having much faith in the Leigh post-office since Tom has been so friendly with that Mr. Dent, who lodges there. I feel as if they were hatching mischief together, and should not be surprised if all those wicked anonymous letters originated with them. They may want you out of their way for something or other, and I know Tom threatened long ago to make mischief between us, and he seems hardly able to contain his delight now he, or some one equally amiable, has done it. And now, John, dear, I wish to call your attention to some lines by Alexander Pope—

> "Of all the causes which conspire to blind
> Man's erring judgment and misguide the mind;
> What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
> Is pride, the never-failing vice of——.

I leave you to fill the *hiatus*, John, if you think the passage pertinent. For my own part, if I thought anything but pride caused you to reject one minute the young lady you had been so importunately soliciting to be your wife the minute before, and all because she would bring with her a burden of guineas, no pen of mine would trace this paper for you. Now, John, dear, you were not too proud to ask me to share your stipend, and to help you to make the best of it, and I think it ungracious that you will not let me better that best. And now, John, this is my advice — go to Manchester, and try how you like living alone in a dingy house in a dismal neighbourhood, and don't write or think of me again so long as you are satisfied and happy; but should you feel *very* miserable, I will give you leave to change your mind, and to make an ample apology any time within six months. And if your heart does not many a time ache for a deeper purse before you have been three months in your new curacy, John Hay's heart and that locality are equally mistaken by

"Your very true love,

"SOPHIA MARSDEN."

The Rev. John Hay was known beyond the confines of his own parish, and was no stranger to Haigh; but the John Hay

he found packing books, and the curate he had seen in the pulpit, or met in the green lanes, scarcely seemed to be the same man, so bent, haggard, and careworn he had become.

His hand shook so that he could hardly open Sophia's letter, and the paper rattled as he held it for reading. Haigh was not slow to interpret the signs of agitation. With innate delicacy he said—

"Aw've business 'oop th' teawn, sir, and if theer's anny answer back aw con call in abeawt an heawr."

A litter of torn writing paper told Haigh on his return how many an attempt had been made to reply; yet there was "No answer. I will see Miss Marsden."

Proud as Lucifer, in his way, the Rev. John was too proud to take advantage of Miss Marsden's generosity. She was proud, too, and considered herself slighted; and so the meeting ended in sending him to Manchester thoroughly wretched, with nothing but his false pride to sustain him, and in leaving her as miserable as it was possible for Sophia Marsden to be.

One paragraph in her letter had, however, made a deeper impression than she had contemplated when she expressed her want of faith in the post-office where Mr. Dent was lodger, and ended with—"they may want you out of their way for something or other."

From the first he had suspected a plot to oust him from his curacy, but he had accredited one or two disaffected parishioners with the scheme. The bare mention of Daniel Dent's name, in juxtaposition with the post-office and Tom Marsden, opened up a train of thought and speculation which travelled far from Sophia and her unappreciated dowry.

How could he possibly stand in Mr. Dent's way? From Mr. Dent to Mr. Dent's sister was a natural transition; and then memory, flying back, opened up possibilities for his being "in the way," not so much at the Marsdens' as at the Booths'.

From the day when he observed the tetanic convulsions of the late Mrs. Booth, he had had an uncomfortable feeling of that lady's assiduous nurse, and had found himself, as it were, on the watch for something, he knew not what. And it had occurred to him more than once that the present Mrs. Booth shrank from his observation. Then if Daniel Dent and his sister and Tom Marsden would plot nefariously to remove one so slightly in their way as himself, what might not they do to any other individual whom they might imagine greatly in their way?

Thus questioning himself, he was moved involuntarily to

take his way to The Willows, though his tutorship had, of course, ended, and he had already taken leave of the family.

He found William in his low chair in the back parlour in considerable pain with his knee, which, within the previous day or two, had begun to swell and inflame.

"I suppose you have your knee dressed regularly now?" interrogated Mr. Hay.

"Oh, yes," answered William; "Mrs. Booth never neglects me in any way; you have no idea how kind she is. She will not allow Carry to meddle with it."

"Soh!" said Mr. Hay to himself; then aloud, "Yet your sister used to dress it formerly!"

"Oh, yes, before she was ill, and whilst we were at Southport; but it was not so bad then as it is now; and Mrs. Booth does not like to trust her to do it. Oh, dear, I wish it was a little easier!"

"Let me look at the knee, William;" and the curate turned up his cuffs as if to undo the bandages.

"Had you not better ring for my stepmother?" asked the youth.

"No, my boy; we can dispense with Mrs. Booth's services on this occasion."

But as the curate untied William's loose trouser, Mrs. Booth entered the room, Caroline in her wake.

Mrs. Booth at once entered a protest against his proceedings.

"Oh, Mr. Hay, you must not do that! William's knee must not be disturbed."

"And why not, madam?" asked the clergyman, with a steady glance from which she shrank.

"Dr. Ashcroft left particular orders that after the knee was dressed it was not to be uncovered for the day."

The Rev. John bowed acquiescence—"I defer to Dr. Ashcroft's dictum," and he re-tied the loosened ribbons of the trouser.

After a little while he said "Good afternoon," without any reference to his departure from Leigh on the morrow.

Straightway he betook himself to Mr. Ashcroft's, struck as much by Caroline's aspect of lassitude and hopelessness as by the unfavourable change in William's knee. He was not in the secret of the flower-box.

He found the surgeon at his bachelor tea by a bright fire, which repeated itself in the old bookcase opposite. As he entered, the doctor rang the bell for another cup and saucer, rather glad of companionship; and with as little ceremony, the other solitary bachelor, temporarily roused from his own despondency, sat down to partake.

But he did not lose sight of his errand. He introduced the subject casually, after a little preliminary chit-chat.

"I have just been round to The Willows, doctor, and was sorry to find William in such pain."

The doctor looked up suddenly, as if unprepared for the remark.

"Dear me! I was in hopes the cooling lotion I sent would have relieved him!"

Without noticing the interjection, Mr. Hay went on—

"I should have liked very much to examine the limb myself, to see what aspect it bore."

"And why did you not?" asked the surgeon, carelessly.

"Because Mrs. Booth was unwilling. She quoted your *particular* orders that, after dressing, the knee was not to be uncovered for the day."

Mr. Ashcroft put a hand on each of his knees, and looked his interlocutor full in the face.

"*I* left no such orders!"

"So I thought!"

"I left instructions that the lotion was to be applied repeatedly. I want to get the inflammation down."

"Do you think that is to be accomplished at The Willows?" inquired the curate, pointedly. "The boy was better and stronger when he came from Southport."

"H'm!" said the doctor, and up went his index finger to his high cheek-bone, and his thumb beneath his chin—"so he was. But why do you put such a question?"

"Because, doctor, as a trustee under his Uncle Ralph's will, I am bound to watch over his welfare; and I think it advisable to remove him—always under medical advice, and with his father's sanction."

The doctor looked searchingly in the curate's face, then at his own knees, and then in the curate's face again.

"H'm! Ah!" said he. "Well, perhaps it might be no worse if you did."

John Hay thought that he was understood. He next put a question which electrified the surgeon.

"Dr. Ashcroft, *what did the first Mrs. Booth die of?*"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

QUESTION AND ANSWER.

"WHAT did Mrs. Booth die of?" repeated the doctor. "That is a singular question, Mr. Hay. Have you any particular motive for the inquiry?"

"Yes, sir, I have. I studied medicine before I went into the church, and was not unqualified to form my own opinion respecting a peculiar fit which attacked the deceased lady one day when I and others were at The Willows. I saw the limbs stiffen and the spine arch, and I heard you, doctor, ask if an overdose of medicine had been taken—ask, too, as if you were not thoroughly satisfied with appearances."

"You are a close observer, Mr. Hay."

"Rather! Professional men have need to observe closely. But your remark confirms my suspicions."

"Suspicions! May I ask, sir, what you suspect?"

"Nay, doctor," replied the Rev. John Hay, "it is for me to ask what *you* suspected? And, to repeat my original question, what *did* Mrs. Booth die of? If there is nothing wrong, there should be no difficulty in answering. My right to put the question and my motive may be briefly told. As William Booth's trustee, I do not feel justified in leaving him where there is a tendency to administer overdoses of medicine, or to misrepresent medical instructions." And the tall curate looked down on the little doctor, who had at first fidgetted somewhat nervously in his arm-chair, but now met the other's steadfast gaze with one full of meaning.

All his own fears and doubts were not only revived, but confirmed by the startling question of the clergyman; and as one who gladly transfers half a burdensome load to a companion's shoulders, he confided to his youngfriend all the doubts which had beset him when Mrs. Booth died. He brought out his prescription-book, showed what drugs had been exhibited, and the doses prescribed—admitting that he had been fairly at fault, unwilling to tax either Miss Dent or his assistant with carelessness; yet more inclined to blame the latter, as being somewhat unsteady and flighty, than the composed, orderly, and attentive nurse, who appeared incapable of a mistake. For wilful maladministration or deliberate poisoning, he could then see no motive whatever.

"But you have altered your opinion since?" assumed, rather than questioned, the curate.

Dr. Ashcroft fell into his old thoughtful position, forefinger and thumb taking possession of cheek and chin.

"Well, I must admit I do see a motive now. Not the sudden rise of Caleb Booth's clerk—that may be perfectly natural; but the marriage of Miss Dent to her master before the mourning was out-worn has, I must confess, set me thinking."

It was clear the two were agreed upon the point—that the first Mrs. Booth had been got rid of to make way for the second.

The next question was, "What is to be done?"

This involved long deliberation. It was no light matter to bring a charge of such a nature against a woman previously extolled, especially when evidence to substantiate might not be forthcoming. Justice might be defeated—nay, even injustice done.

"I scarcely think if the body were exhumed for investigation, sufficient traces of the poison would remain to bear out a charge, if we make one," observed the curate, thoughtfully, bending forward in his chair for the other's response.

"Well," deliberated the surgeon, "it *is* questionable. It is just twelve months to-day since the poor lady died. But"—and he paused—his professional reputation trembled in the balance—"if it were *possible;* as strychnia had been for some time administered medicinally, I am afraid there would be required other evidence than the presence of the poison and our suspicions to convict the second wife, sir!"

Mr. Hay rose from his seat impatiently, and paced the narrow room in much perplexity.

"It is frightful," he said, "to contemplate even the possibility of a woman with such propensities being at the head of a family whom she regards but as stepping-stones, and that laboratory, stocked with all sorts of chemicals, close to her hand!"

"H'm, to be sure—so it is!" said the surgeon. "Stay here, Mr. Hay, whilst I run round to The Willows and inspect the bad knee. If it be as you surmise, we will soon carry Master William out of her clutches. Miss Caroline is safe enough—at least, her life is. I think that managing clerk is hankering after her. Poor William's money, I fear, is putting *him* in danger."

The doctor, after a jingling of glass in the surgery, was gone. In a few minutes he turned back.

"Perhaps, sir, you had better follow me in about a quarter of an hour. If I suspect foul play, I'll drop my handkerchief and ask you to pick it up."

Mrs. Booth was "surprised to see the doctor," when he stepped in on his way from a patient at West Leigh—still more surprised when he "thought he might as well look at William's knee now he was there;" and would fain have invented an excuse, had not William himself unsuspiciously balked her.

"I wish you would, doctor. It is exceedingly painful to-day. It is strange—I am not near so well as when I was at Southport."

"I am afraid the air of Leigh does not agree with you, William," said the doctor, with a covert meaning, which somehow struck Mrs. Booth as peculiar.

Mr. Booth was present, and watched the uncovering of the limb with much parental feeling. It was swollen and inflamed beyond the surgeon's calculations.

"Oh, here's Mr. Hay!" said he, as the curate made his appearance. "You are just the man we want. Look at that knee, sir;" and the surgeon, moving aside, dropped his handkerchief at the other's feet. "Would you oblige me, sir?" The long back bent, the handkerchief was raised, and a glance exchanged.

"You have popped in very opportunely, Mr. Hay," said the doctor, taking a bottle of lotion from his own pocket, and saturating a fresh piece of lint with it. "You go to Manchester to-morrow, sir, I believe?"

The Rev. John Hay bowed.

"Then I strongly advise that you take our young friend along with you, and place him at once under the care of either Dr. Harrison or Dr. Bardsley, or both. As the boy's trustee, you are the fittest person—save his father—and the knee has assumed so sudden and peculiar an aspect, I beg to be relieved from the responsibility."

Mrs. Booth affected much concern; but at the same time, in her own quiet way, suggested the desirability of consulting some other practitioner on the spot, whose skill or self-confidence was greater than Mr. Ashcroft's.

He, taking no notice whatever of the covert innuendo, desired a private conference with Mr. Booth and Mr. Hay in another apartment; but she, with a cool adroitness peculiar to herself, contrived to make one at the consultation.

Calm as she looked, her sensations were those of one treading the brink of a precipice in the dark.

It was quite a relief to find that privacy was desired on the patient's account solely. That the boy's knee was in so dangerous a condition that amputation might be necessary to save his life, and even that was so risky, the doctor considered the

Manchester Infirmary the safest and best place to consign him to—"under the circumstances," he added, with such grave deliberation, she felt assured that he suspected her.

The Rev. John Hay supported the doctor's views. It was settled that Mr. Booth should accompany his son, and that Mr. Ashcroft should be there in the morning to dress the knee himself before they started. Mr. Hay was to meet them at Bury Lane End.

This dressing of the knee by the doctor had its weight.

The new wife no longer felt opposition safe; so, making the best of her character as a model stepmother, she went from room to room, quite in a bustle for her, arranging and providing for the two travellers.

Caroline was very little assistance. The news of her brother's possible danger came as a fresh blow to one already wounded. Scarcely could she master her grief before William, who bore himself up bravely, though nothing had been whispered to him of an operation.

Fain would Caroline have gone with them, but that did not suit her stepmother's plans, and she opposed the proposition resolutely.

With the morning came the doctor, the knee was dressed, the youth said "good-bye" to the servants, who wept, and to the canary, who answered with a "cheep-cheep," kissed fondly the tearful sister who clung to him, and shook hands with the stepmother, who faddled about him to wrap him up and settle his cushions, as if she were the very kindest of mothers.

Caroline's tears fell fast as the phaeton drove away. She felt as if everything most dear to her was drifting from her. Doubts of Fred, suggested by Mrs. Booth and the mischievous earring, were eating into her heart like a canker. Fain would the new wife have had her stepdaughter array herself in gay colours, but she clung to her mourning.

"My soul is in mourning," she said, "and black best befits me," her utterly hopeless tones telling of melancholy, rapidly becoming morbid.

"You will take cold, Miss Booth, if you remain in the open air so long without shawl or bonnet," observed Mr. Dent, with solicitude almost tender, as she stood at the gate straining her eyes along the road long after the phaeton was out of sight.

She returned no answer—did not hear him, in fact.

Again he addressed her—

"My dear Miss Booth, I am afraid you are exposing yourself

to the raw air very unwisely. Do let me entreat you to come in ;" and he touched her hand as if he would lead her away.

The touch rather than the words recalled her thoughts from Manchester and the Antipodes. She permitted him to lead her towards the house, Mrs. Booth discreetly withdrawing from the front door as they approached.

Unconscious that she responded to his action rather than to his speech, which had fallen on deaf ears, he interpreted her unrebuking acquiescence somewhat too favourably.

He still retained her hand as he led her up the path, while the wind sighed through the weeping willows which shed their yellow leaves like tears before her, as if for companionship or compassion.

"Miss Booth," he resumed, in a low voice, "may I be permitted to remark that your friends are pained to see the melancholy you indulge."

One word arrested her attention.

"Friends, sir!" said she, sadly. "My last friend, the one whose heart and thoughts are surely mine, has just gone from me, perchance never to return. Oh, William!" and both hands went up to her face to hide the fresh drops which forced their way between her fingers.

He was touched by her emotion. They stood on the broad flat step at the hall door.

"Do not say so, my dear Miss Booth; you have many friends —many true friends ;" and his voice dropping into a tender murmur, he added, "I know you have one friend who would die to spare you pain."

She lifted her wet eyes.

"To whom do you refer?"

She half hoped to hear the name of Frederick Marsden. Her eyes drooped before his, as from his thin lips fell the one low but emphatic word—

"Myself!"

Bewildered, embarrassed for one instant, she stood mute as if spell-bound. There was that in his eyes which told of passionate earnestness, of feverish longing ; and Caroline was of too gentle a nature to give wilful pain to anyone. But she was too true to her one love to accept the homage of another. Sophia Marsden would have shrugged her shoulders, lifted her eyebrows, and have dismissed him with a merry jest. She was in too sad a mood for sportive sallies or sharp reproof.

Pain, only pain—pain for him and for herself—gathered lines in her young face as she shrank from him, and pain only broke forth in her utterance.

"Oh, Mr. Dent, how could you—how could you? And at a time like this, too!"

Crushing her hands together as if he added bitterness and not comfort to her cup, she brushed past him, and never paused until she had reached her own room, and locked herself in, with a new trouble added to her old ones.

That afternoon she sent Scholes to post with a note for Sophia Marsden, inviting her to come over to The Willows and remain during the absence of her father. William's return she knew to be indefinite.

She longed, despite the counsel of her stepmother, to share her burdensome secret with the sister of her absent lover, and, while showing the earring, seek from her, if possible, consolation. But even confirmation, she argued, would be better than suspense.

At his sister's request, Mr. Dent not only spent the evening at The Willows, but occupied a bed there in the absence of the master—Mrs. Booth professing a dread of burglars when there were only women in the house.

After his late declaration, Caroline was loth to come in contact with him; but he made no effort to revive the subject, content to wait, and with silent, respectful devotion, water that seed, until it, like others, should germinate and bear fruit. He knew well how his sister had prepared the ground for it.

In some sort he was sorry for the pain inflicted on the being he loved; but he argued that it could not be avoided—that the end he had in view necessitated such measures; that he was only cruel to be kind; he would obliterate all the painful memories of the past when once they were married. In short, "all the ways of this man were right in his own eyes," and, like Emma and Job Hindley, he considered that "the end justified the means," though they held the dogma with a very wide difference.

His manner was so deferentially apologetic that Caroline's resentment was disarmed; besides, there was no declining his civilities without attaching undue importance to his words, and attracting the attention of his sister and the servants, for neither of which she had any inclination.

One day went by after another without bringing any answer from Sophia.

Happening to express her surprise at this, Caroline's surprise was heightened by her stepmother's remark—

"Ah, no doubt she was jealous of Mr. Hay's frequent visits here."

"Jealous!" exclaimed Caroline, looking up from her crochet in astonishment.

"Yes; I understand they had a serious quarrel before he went away. The match quite broken off."

"Indeed!" pondered Caroline, but said no more, thinking that, if it were indeed so, Sophia would be in no mood either for writing or visiting. The "jealous" hint did not cost her a single thought. But under the rule of the new wife, Caroline—open, ingenuous Caroline—had learned reticence. From her own dear mother she had no secrets. For this woman she had no confidence.

The weather was wet and unpromising; but she made up her mind the first fine day to walk over to Tyldesley and ascertain for herself how matters stood with both of them.

It was a wise resolve, the importance of which not even Mrs. Booth could have estimated then.

In the interim, however, Mr. Booth wrote to his wife. William's leg was somewhat better, and his tone of health improving. Yet Drs. Harrison and Bardsley both had counselled amputation, and that he should remain in Manchester until the operation was performed.

"Poor fellow—it's a thousand pities!" Harriet Booth said to Caroline, who wept bitterly as she thought of the suffering in store for her beloved brother.

In her own room, the woman who had no heart save for *her* brother muttered to herself—

"Perhaps, after all, he may not get over it. But if he does, well then——"

But she did not trust even the walls with the contingency.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SOPHIA'S SUMMING UP.

A DREARY week of excessive rain rendered country roads untreadable by dainty feet, and kept Caroline in the house—no longer blythe as her own canary, but a wanderer from room to room, spiritless, moping, and melancholy.

A letter from her father to say that the amputation had been successfully performed, that the boy was brave and patient, and John Hay all that a Christian friend should be at such a time, quite supplying the place of lost Uncle Ralph, put a little fresh life into her; and when the wind blew the watery clouds away and the sun came out, Caroline was ready to go out also.

To preserve the new wife's reputation as a notable housewife, no sooner had Caleb turned his back on The Willows than furniture was turned out, carpets turned up, painters and whitewashers turned in for a thorough autumnal cleansing. She had hitherto made a point of fastening on her stepdaughter whenever she went abroad; and it was with no little chagrin she saw Caroline cloaked and booted, when she was constrained by her self-imposed task to remain behind.

Caroline was ever a welcome visitor at the Marsdens', and Mrs. Marsden greeted her with motherly kindness. Sophia flew to her with open arms, and a flow of spirits which spoke largely for her belief that the Rev. John's love would conquer pride, or for her womanly ability to conceal her own sufferings—a little of both perhaps.

No note of Caroline's had reached Sophia, and she was quick to accredit the Ogre with its retention. She was, however, wrong this time. Scholes, acting on the manager's orders, carried all letters from the house to the counting-house, *for enclosure in the business post-bag*, and the missive went astray before it reached the post-office.

Through Tom, who was frequently at the bleachworks now, they had heard of William's removal to Manchester, and so forth; but when Caroline repeated her father's eulogium of John Hay, Sophia's eyes almost danced with delight.

These matters were discussed downstairs, but it was in the privacy of Sophia's chamber that Caroline produced Nelly Scholes's earring, and told with many sighs where she had found it, and the cruel inference Mrs. Booth had drawn.

Very beautiful to see was Sophia's animated face as she undertook to vindicate her brother Frederick's honour, and reinstate him in the stronghold of Caroline's heart. And marvellous to reflect on was the skill with which she unravelled the tangled skein of chicanery in which all seemed to be together enmeshed; eliciting from Caroline that Daniel Dent was inclined to play the wooer in his own behalf.

An Australian letter had followed the Rev. John Hay to Manchester, and been remitted to Mrs. Marsden, through Haigh and his wife, who had latterly struck up an acquaintance with Ann in order to form a chain of communication—the cabinet-maker's own appearance at Marsdens' being out of the question.

Promptly on its receipt, Sophia had dropped a brief line to Caroline, in the expectation that she also had heard from Fred.

To the amazement and consternation of both, it now transpired that neither from Fred nor Sophia had note or letter found its way to Miss Booth.

Caroline was lost in a labyrinth of doubt and perplexity, and in a pitiable state of nervous agitation, and, as was frequently the case now, gave way to a flood of tears.

"Stay, stay, my dear," cried Sophia, cheerfully; "every cloud has a silver lining. Just wait whilst I don my studying-cap; and thank our missing epistles for giving me a clue. And mop up your tears this instant, or I'll leave you in the dark."

It was a very sickly smile with which Caroline greeted this sally, and answered a few of Sophia's questions, but soon her tears dried up in the feverish interest Fred's champion excited.

"Now, my dear, listen to me!" said Sophia, laying down the law with her forefinger. "You wrote to me and I to you. Neither letter got to hand. I posted mine myself—*that* could not go astray *here*. Your friend, Mr. Dent, lodges at the Leigh post-office—you have a post-bag, and he opens it one way, closes it the other. Nothing would be easier than to abstract any document he had a fancy to. If he has fixed his ugly grey eyes on you, he would not care that you should fix your handsome brown ones on a constant lover's caligraphy, or on the scrawl of that said lover's sister, if she made him her theme."

"Oh, Sophy, Mr. Dent could never be so wicked!" exclaimed Caroline, breathless.

"Oh, simple Carry! Is not Mr. Dent the sworn friend of the Ogre? And is there any wickedness of which *he* is not capable?"

Sophia had been standing with her left hand on Caroline's

shoulder; now she sat down close in front of her, and of the window, from which the garden gate was visible.

She resumed—

"In nine cases out of ten, an unanswered invitation and a hint of 'jealousy' would create a breach between two young-lady friends. Mr. Dent's pussy-cat sister, who has laid her paw on that big mouse, your poor deluded pater, calculated that we should be of the silly nine, not the discreet tenth; and that simple miscalculation of hers is likely to interfere with other calculations of hers."

Sophia's manner changed. She dropped her tone of light banter.

"Carry, my love, I am afraid that your trouble is only beginning, and that you will need a firm will, a stout heart, and an unswerving faith alike in God and in our Fred to combat it, if you would be victorious. Your stepmother placed that earring amongst Fred's flowers as sure as I am a living woman. If, as you say, it once belonged to Nelly Scholes, I have a pretty good guess where she got it from."

It was no part of Sophia's intention to incriminate Tom in her summing up; even though she did give him credit for helping the Dents to fix the stigma of his own vice on his brother. It was one thing to accuse him loosely of wickedness in general, and quite another to charge him with any individual and particular act of wickedness.

"Make your mind easy, Caroline, about Fred. He is the very soul of honour, and worthy any true woman's love. He no more carried off Nelly Scholes than I did. Job Hindley saw Nelly Scholes go into the Bolton Theatre a few weeks after he and Emma were married, so she could not be in Australia. And he saw, the same night, a gentleman also enter the same place, corresponding in all particulars with the one the girl was seen with before she eloped—a man totally unlike our noble Fred."

"Oh, Sophy, Sophy, how thankful I am I came to you this day! You have cleared the mist from my eyes, and lifted a load from my heart. But how shall I recover Fred's letter? It would be no use asking either Mrs. Booth or Mr. Dent for it."

And she passed her hand behind her neck in an attitude of perplexity and pain.

"My dear, innocent Carry, you would never make a diplomatist. You must forego that letter—ignore it altogether, if you hope to defeat the schemers on your own hearthstone. Be as much concerned as you like about the non-arrival of letters; but before you leave this house write to my brother, and wait with

all the patience you can for his answer. Let all letters pass through the trusty hands of Haigh, and I will devise means to prevent miscarriage. But whatever you hear, or whatever is said, believe nothing against the absent; and be cautious how you trust, or offend, your stepmother."

Mrs. Marsden wondered what kept the girls so long upstairs, but she remembered her own youth, and made no remark. And when Caroline hurried away before tea (to avoid being seen by Tom), under a pretext that the evenings closed in soon, and the road was lonely, she did not gainsay it. She knew that Sophia would have pressed her to stay had there not been reason otherwise.

Caroline went home with her eyes opened, and, so far as Fred was concerned, with her mind relieved. She soon found she had only exchanged one burden for another. It was no easy matter for a frank and ingenuous girl to set a watch upon herself and those about her. Suspicion is an awful heritage.

Mr. Booth came back in the early part of September, leaving William in charge of his clerical trustee, and in a fair way to recover, although with the loss of a limb; and there, under one pretext or another, he remained long after his new crutches began to be heard upon the floors; the facilities for advanced education were represented as so much greater in Manchester than Leigh, and Mr. Hay was, moreover, loth to lose his patient young companion.

Caroline would have been glad to have him back, and so would Mrs. Booth; but Mr. Ashcroft said so dictatorially that Leigh air was not good for his health, that both—for different reasons—were silent.

And so the months went by, and still no letters for Caroline, and the silence and suspense were very hard to bear.

And slowly, slowly she saw that Daniel Dent was advancing towards her, as he was rising upwards, and her father, seemingly infatuated, resigned more and more into his hands.

There were signs of a change at the Marsdens'. Machinists came and went with considerable mystery, but somehow Rosa Bradshaw got an inkling of what was afoot, and soon it was bruited abroad that the Marsdens were "launching out;" were having power-looms fitted up in their factory.

But Simeon Marsden was too timid, too wavering for any great enterprise, and every fresh outlay of his hoarded capital cost him two or three days' illness, and two or three weeks' ill-temper, so that the work did not progress very rapidly.

Tom's "Cotton Grass" shares rose in the market, and Dent

advised him to sell, but Brown, the solicitor's clerk, whispered that they were still rising, and in his greed he held them till they fell again, fell steadily, and still the clerk urged him to hold them against a coming rise.

Meanwhile Sophia had come into possession of her nine thousand pounds, and not only her father and Tom, but Mr. Dent also, were anxious to guide her in its investment.

She had, however, a habit of thinking for herself, and she told her mother, laughingly, she thought there was no investment so safe as *Hay*.

Nevertheless, she left the Rev. John to punish himself with his pride. She knew how poor was the district in which his cure lay, and how often his generous heart must bleed for physical suffering which a few golden drops might alleviate, and how he would curtail his own comforts to relieve the temporal wants of those in his spiritual care. But she never wrote to him nor he to her, save when letters (full of cravings to hear from Caroline) came from Australia, and then the two parted lovers wasted quires of paper in endeavouring to hit the happy mean between the coldness they did not feel and the intense affection they did. It is so hard to be friends only where love has been and is.

Yet Sophia wrote to William Booth now and then, and at Christmas sent a goodly cheque to the youth for distribution amongst the poor. And again in the New Year.

She was not niggardly amongst the poor in Tyldesley, but I am bound to confess her liberality there and in Ancoats bore no proportion to each other; and the inference clearly is that she wished the Rev. John to feel how much good *he* might do if the nine thousand pounds were his own.

Perhaps he did feel it, perhaps the loneliness of his life pressed all the heavier upon him as the months crept on without a glimpse of her beaming face, or an echo of her cheery voice, and the consciousness that he was marring two lives instead of one stole upon him.

Be this as it may, before the six months' probation expired, the last figment of his lofty "independence" died a natural death, William Booth having very innocently contributed to the same.

Caroline had been over to Manchester with her father to visit her dear William, and whilst there she had detailed some of the petty persecutions Sophia endured because she would not suffer father or brother to make free with her possessions, which, after their departure, he retailed to the clergyman, as they sat together one evening in the twilight before candles were brought in.

"I wonder Miss Marsden does not marry to get out of their

way. I should if I were in her place," said the boy. "I know Gilbert Eckersley would give his ears for her, and so would Joseph Croft; and I thought at one time you were fond of her, Mr. Hay. You see, if I was lame, I was not blind. I suppose she stays at home on account of her mother, for Carry tells me she has just refused Gilbert; and he would have been a good match too. Perhaps she is in love with some one who does not care for her——"

William had run on, all unobservant that the curate's head was bowed upon his hands in mute agony.

Presently a convulsive sob shook his frame. William rose in alarm and trepidation, and with the aid of his crutches swung himself to his side.

"What is the matter, Mr. Hay? I hope I have not said anything to distress you?" His voice sank to a whisper. "Sophy Marsden has not refused you too, Mr. Hay—has she?"

"No, no, my boy; it might have been better if she had;" and he rose to pace away his pain.

William looked bewildered.

"William, I have cast away a great blessing, and I have to bear the penalty. She is rich, and I—poor, or I might have married her and been happy; as it is, I—I could not take advantage of her generosity."

"I don't understand," said William, still more perplexed. "If *you* had been rich, would you not have married her?"

"Ah, would I not!"

"Then I think it's very mean of *you* not to let Sophy give you her money if she likes;" and William looked indignant.

Very little sleep got the curate that night. Visions of stalwart Gilbert Eckersley and Sophia Marsden seated together on money-bags disturbed his broken slumbers, and for some days he was restless and unfit for his duties.

But the end of it all was that he wrote a long and not very coherent letter, in which pride and love still seemed to conflict; but there was no mistaking the fact that he said he could not live without her, yet scarcely hoped for pardon, though she had promised it.

And she answered him saucily, archly, merrily, as of yore, and told him she had begun to fancy he was going to leave her to die an old maid, and was meditating founding a sisterhood of blighted spinsters and shutting herself up to grow vinegarish, when his letter came; but as she preferred honey to vinegar, and Hay to either, she would resign the beatific sisterhood to some one else, in order to keep him alive.

Simeon Marsden was furious; but that was nothing new. Sophia had her mother's blessing; and before the April buds came, Simeon Marsden had one less to rail at—one sunbeam had set on his home; and John Hay had one more to love and cherish, one more to help him in his labour of love and charity—a sunbeam to light his life.

Tom Marsden growled and cracked his knuckles when she carried her nine thousand pounds beyond reach of his griping fingers; but he soon had something else to growl at—for Poll Sharrock had found him, and the "hunt" began in earnest.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT OUR ANTIPODES.

THE letters, which had come from Fred, with the unfortunate box of flowers, had been written from Melbourne in the first flush of surprise when Captain Dambrill handed him the banker's order which was to put him in necessary funds, and for which he had more reason to be grateful to Caleb Booth than at that time he could conceive.

The one which reached Mrs. Marsden at a later date, when its companion did *not* reach Caroline, was dated from Ballarat, and Mrs. Marsden, in pity for the patient girl's aching heart, handed it over to her. Inasmuch as it contained intelligence of her dear one, it was a precious boon; but, as it came to other than herself, and lacked the personal strain of affection, it was a very poor substitute for that which should have been hers.

Yet for that very reason it is better fitted to lay before our readers:—

"Ballarat, September 7, 185—.

"MY DEAR MOTHER AND SISTER,

"Do not be shocked that I am writing this on a Sunday. It is the only day we diggers have for handling anything in the shape of a pen. I told you I had found a Lancashire man for a mate. It is no use working here without one. Indeed, we need three for the matter of that; and have picked up a third, a Melbourne merchant named Scott, who has cast in his lot with us, as he expects to make a fortune here quicker than by trade.

"It was no easy matter to get here, the roads being little better than cart tracks cut up by former pilgrims to the same auriferous shrine, where the ruts are often half a yard deep. Here and there a settler has made a corduroy road for his own use; but that simply means that he has thrown logs of wood across the muddy track, and as these get easily displaced, even the corduroy road is not much to boast of.

"I was glad when I got out of Melbourne. It was a Babel of people from all lands, for whom there was no accommodation. Sheds, unfinished houses, deserted by their builders, shanties, and canvas tents were occupied, and fought for, by people who had nowhere to lodge either themselves or their stores.

Respectable young women were rambling about the streets and sleeping on doorsteps. My first purchase was a revolver, and I had to thank my sailor's knife that I was not left without means to buy it, the roads were so unsafe.

"We had to take a boat down the narrow, yellowy, muddy Yarra-Yarra, and cross the bay to Geelong on our way to Ballarat, and had a narrow chance of going to the bottom, through the jumping in of a drunken digger, armed to the teeth, who insisted on bearing us company. He had come from Mount Alexander laden with gold, and back he was going, laden with little but drink and weapons of offence. My companions would have pitched him overboard, and it was with some difficulty I persuaded them to make room for him rather than swamp the boat in a struggle. He leapt, or rather stumbled, ashore at Geelong with no more ceremony than a rough slap on my shoulder from a horny, not too clean, hand, and the words, 'I say, mate, if you're bound for the Ballarat diggings, we may stumble over one another again, and Headlong Bill's not the chap to forget a good turn, I'm blowed if he is!'

"At Geelong we hired a dray, a sort of Manchester lurry, rough, but strong, as it need be, to stand the bumps and jogs of haphazard roads—one day over granite, another over marl; now through the scrub, now through the bush, with a great boulder or the root of a tree right in the track; one day over rugged ground baked in the sun, the next through a swamp, or over a creek; or, after rain, through slush and mire, which turn the roads into muddy streams.

"Our route lay through sand and scrub to Flemington village—not an English village, remember, but an irregular group of detached wooden houses and shanties, with dogs, pigs, poultry, and cattle about, children grubbing in the dirt, and women untidy, coarse, and unkempt as the men. Let us hope it will be better by-and-by.

"After leaving Flemington the land undulates, and in crossing the brow of a hill between there and Kynaston, a jibbing horse caused our dray to upset, and over and over it rolled as though it had been a toy. It was a disaster at our very outset which we three could never have repaired—though Pipe had roughed it some months, and our Melbourne chum, Scott, had pith in him, and I'm not the stripling I was, by any means. Fortunately our harness had snapped, or our horses would not have been worth much. Our few stores had gone flying. Luckily, we were not the only travellers on that track. A couple of bullock drays, loaded with immigrants, came up in

answer, as it were, to our 'cooey,' and who should start foremost to our help but that self-same Headlong Bill who had tumbled so perilously into our boat!

"By the aid of the men and the bullocks, our dray was righted, we mended our harness with rope in very primitive style, and after jogging on a few miles further, camped for the night, under a huge red-gum tree, almost within sight of the diggings. We lit fires; gridirons, billies, and pannikins came out; supper, such as it was, was despatched with a relish I never knew in Tyldesley—dear, far-off Tyldesley!—Headlong Bill was singing comic songs to amuse the weary children of a sad-looking mother, when down came—not bushrangers, but rain upon us, a soaking downpour, and your son, dear mother, was glad to wrap himself up in his blanket, and spend the night under the shelter of the dray—Headlong Bill having volunteered to stand sentinel for the whole lot of us. He was as sober as the best of us then, and somehow I had no doubt of his good faith.

"The first streak of day found us harnessing our horses in hope to find a better shelter; though we left our temporary companions behind. Soon our hearts leapt high, as ugly-looking holes, singly or in groups, and here and there a bearded, unwashed digger, with his pick on his shoulder, even at that early hour, told that we drew near to the gold-field; and soon the sight and smell of a digger's camp told it more effectually. (Drains are at present unthought-of luxuries.) But we were only at Boninyong, not Ballarat, and we barely stopped at the crowded inn—such an inn!—to refresh ourselves and our jaded animals, before we were on our way again through the rain and the scattered diggings to the haven of our hopes, the valley of Ballarat. And, oh, my dear mother, if you could only see what a Pandemonium the greed of gold has made of this beautiful valley, you would feel that your son has need of all your prayers to keep him clear of its horrible vortex.

"Our first care was to obtain from the Government commissioner our licences to dig for gold, and for these we had to pay. And there is some talk of raising the fees for the licences. If they are raised there will be a row, for one-third of the diggers are little better than desperadoes, and the men who would play pitch-and-toss with sovereigns would resist a further Government claim, however slight, on that which they have won by the sweat of their brow.

"We have a calico tent, in shape like a cottage, and have an outside chimney built of mud and stones, and we take it in turns to guard our possessions, and cook, whilst the others are

driving the pick through the quartz to the blue-slate-clay, where most of the nuggets are found.

"I wish many times I had brought with me a knowledge of geology; it might have helped us to the success which seems so slow to come. Gold-digging is hard, feverish work, full of unhealthy excitement, and in its very uncertainty is little better than gambling. No wonder that drink and gambling follow so closely in its wake.

"But this is Sunday, and neither gold-digging nor gold-washing breaks its sanctity. Yet the day only seems to give leisure for other occupations. Scott is out gathering firewood. Pipe is washing his clothes, and (good-natured mate that he is) mine too; he can feel for my anxiety to get to the post-office with my letters for you and Caroline.

"Our claim is on Golden Point, and we are digging into the blue clay; and we seem to get larger nuggets as we proceed. Fancy me, mother, as I sit on a log of wood, with a square of plank for a desk, a fellow with an unshaved beard, a Panama grass hat, a jumper, a red shirt, moleskin trousers, a silk sash round my waist (to serve for a purse), and big, thick, leather thigh-boots, only fit for an excavator—which, in fact, I am.

"Are father and Tom more civil now I am out of the way? I hope so, for your sake, dear mother. Tell Emma that, unless she and Job Hindley make a match of it, I should like to recommend my mate, Ned Pipe. When is Sophy likely to become Hay? The curate's a good fellow. I've had a famous letter from him. Do you see Caroline often? I wish, mother, that either you or Sophy would have an eye to her. I am always dreaming of her and poor dear William, and I either see them in the midst of cats and serpents, or drowning in seas of blood; and it is all so terrible, I wake with a start, as wet with perspiration as if I had been in a bath. I'm not superstitious, but I'll swear there is something wrong.

"Now I must conclude with a multitude of blessings and good wishes for all of you, not forgetting Ann and her sweetheart, Jim. Tell her to wait till I come back, and she shall have a wedding-ring of Australian gold. And now, once more, farewell. Don't forget to pray for your runaway son and brother,

"FRED. MARSDEN.

"P.S.—I wrote to Caroline last Sunday, and the letters go by the same mail."

This letter was the chief comfort Caroline had for many weary, lonesome months. She made a silken case for it, and wore it next her heart night and day.

Sophia's marriage bore away from her the only confidant she had; for since her father took Miss Dent to wife, a change had come across even their daily intercourse.

However kind and friendly Mrs. Booth might seem—and she did lay herself out to win the confidence and affection of her stepdaughter—that letter and Sophia's caution stood as barriers between them. With the double warning, how could she trust the woman who had crept into her mother's place and absorbed her father?

She longed for William's return, and could scarcely comprehend why Dr. Ashcroft should maintain that the boy was better in all respects where he was.

About the house she went with little care for many things which once had interest for her. Only in the garden, where she had spent so many hours with Fred, did she seem aught of her old self; but there, amongst the flowers he had planted, or in the grotto, she felt as if his spirit held communion with hers, and rebuked her for distrust.

Yes, her piano solaced her somewhat; but even there she dwelt on all which kept alive her memories of Fred. She played the airs he loved, she sang the songs she had sung to him, until even her father grew tired of hearing evermore the self-same tunes, and asked for something new.

Mr. Daniel Dent took the hint, and brought her fashionable songs and music from time to time; and when she would have declined their acceptance, Caleb Booth said, "Pooh! Pooh! Isn't Dent one of ourselves? Don't be foolish."

Another consolation she had—whenever she could steal out for a walk without her grey-eyed stepmother by her side, which was not often, the clinging affection of that excellent individual manifesting itself in a craving for the young lady's society.

Her motive, as expressed to Mr. Booth, was to "keep the dear girl from moping so much about that worthless good-for-nothing, who was best forgotten." Her motive, as understood by Mr. Daniel Dent, was simply cat-like vigilance, lest the tortured mouse should slip from under her paws.

Caroline felt herself, as it were, always under one or the other eye, and rejoiced when she could escape. Then she was sure to turn her steps in the one direction, and seek refuge with Mrs. Marsden, whose motherly sympathy and Christian counsel sustained her wonderfully.

Son and daughters had both gone from the good old lady; but she pursued her way, resigned and cheerful, bearing the tempers of the two domestic tyrants with the uncomplaining meekness of

a saint; and the loving hopefulness of this pious woman was as a refreshing fountain to Caroline's parched soul.

But even these visits had a penalty attached.

Either Tom would turn gallant, and offer to escort her home; or, which was more frequent, Mr. Dent would meet her on the homeward way, and turn back with her, although she never accepted his proffered arm, and was as distant as their new relations permitted.

Now and then she endeavoured to elude him by going home along the high road instead of through Atherton Park, and on one of these occasions she came suddenly face to face with Scholes and a tall dark woman in deep conference. The woman was dressed in tawdry finery, and to her vehement speech added earnest gestures, while Scholes had his hands clenched, and his face set in a rigid scowl.

They, or at least Scholes, did not observe her as she passed; and it was not until after-events recalled it that she remembered meeting them, although the attitude and vehemence of the woman had attracted her attention and excited her wonder at the time.

CHAPTER XL.

COMING HOME!

Is it needful to say that, when Poll Sharrock and Scholes met, the betrayer of Nelly Scholes was in danger?

Tom Marsden had kept his "Cotton-Grass" shares, and was likely to keep them, so rapidly were they going down in the share market; scientific men having demonstrated the impracticability of spinning its smooth fibres into a thread having any tenuity.

He was not too well pleased at the prospect; but he hoped shortly to strike a balance in his own favour. His father had set his new power-looms in motion, and already the prospectus of the projected Spinning and Weaving Company was in preparation.

Father and son were alike elate with the prospect of selling their "plant" at a price enormously above its value, and still, as managing directors, holding the reins in their own hands profitably.

Yet clouds gathered on the horizon—mere specks at first, but rolling up and massing thunderously as the months went by.

The first heavy drops came down on the head of pious, unsuspecting Tom, who, forgetful alike of Poll Sharrock and poor Nelly, was then bowing in adoration before the golden charms of the Miss Kenyon his father had once recommended to Fred.

One by one three several farmers, employing three separate solicitors, commenced legal proceedings against him for trespass on their lands, and for damage to their growing crops, on the night of that thunderstorm which he had so many reasons to remember.

He was disposed to make light of the first application, and carry off the matter with a high hand; but being in Bolton, he turned into Bebbington's office, and, without any definite idea, exhibited to his friend Brown the first letter he had received, as "a good joke" rather than otherwise.

His "friend," however, quite put another aspect on the matter, and advised him either to compromise or seek legal advice without delay—"not Bebbington, lest it should come to the old chap's ears."

Brown also recommended a lawyer, and he, in his desire to master all the points of the case, so questioned his client on the cause of his detour from the road, and consequent trespass, as to recall forgotten Poll Sharrock and her threat; and at once Tom knew *her* to be the prime unflinching instigator of the action.

This lawyer, a Mr. Holt, said nothing of compromise—*that* would not have suited his book. He affirmed that the plaintiff had "not a leg to stand upon," and would be sure to abandon the action if his client showed a bold front.

The farmer's solicitor held a different opinion; and the farmer having means to back his claim, he pursued it to the verge of a trial; and then Tom (who dreaded nothing so much as the publication of his misdeeds and the appearance of Poll Sharrock in the witness-box, which would leave him without a rag of character) himself proposed a compromise, and was glad to escape by the payment of a good round sum, to say nothing of legal costs on both sides.

A second and a third suit followed, but, wiser grown, Tom offered compensation at the outset; and the farmers, having no private malice to satisfy, came to terms readily enough.

Yet in each case lawyers' fees had to be paid, and that without delay; and Tom, who had already drawn largely on the firm, dared not risk overdrawing his private account, lest the whole transaction should come to his father's knowledge.

In this strait he betook himself to his other friend, Daniel Dent, and he, full of the milk of human kindness, introduced Thomas Marsden to a bill-discounter in Bolton, who accommodated Mr. Dent's friend with much pleasure, if from rather an *interested* motive.

And now Tom had got his foot in a string which held him fast, and gave him every now and then an unpleasant jerk as a reminder.

Ordinary business had not stood still in the meantime, the prospectuses were issued, and the "Spinning and Weaving Company" was progressing favourably through its preliminary stages. It had been part of Dent's original idea to add "Bleaching" to the programme—and Caleb Booth, under his generalship, gave his adhesion to the scheme; but neither Mr. Bradley nor the Rev. John Hay, William's trustees, would assent to the proposition, and the youth yet lacked two years of the term assigned by his Uncle Ralph for emancipation from their control. So that step was not taken.

As it stood, the company was progressing fairly, and the two Marsdens, as I said before, were elate.

In the midst of it all, a breath—it was nothing more—shook old Marsden like a sycamore in a storm.

All at once, as it were, the air of Tyldesley became infected with rumours that justice had been baulked at the inquest on Ralph Hyde, that Simeon Marsden was little better than a murderer, and that his son, Thomas Marsden, was a deliberate perjurer.

No one knew how it began, or how it spread; but spread it did. Then it was found that small, badly-printed, anonymous handbills had been dropped in all parts of the town, and been picked up by all sorts of people. Nay, they did not only flutter in the fields and lanes of Tyldesley and Leigh, blow in through the open windows at The Willows, and the open door of Hindley's shop, but they were picked up by ostlers at inn doors in Bolton, and by merchants on 'Change in Liverpool and Manchester; and the very breezes blew one of the libellous papers to Simeon Marsden's feet within his own garden-gate.

Since Tom had been taken into partnership, and he had had no motive to keep the ball rolling, the whole matter had been allowed to sink into oblivion; and the cotton-spinner, unwitting of an evil intent, had gone to sleep with an easy conscience, not considering himself answerable for the involuntary consequences of his temporary passion.

The awakening was as startling as it was summary. In his first blind fury he accused Tom of a malignant attempt to injure him, and there was a scene in their great kitchen only possible between such a father and such a son.

For the younger bully was equally furious, and, pointing out the paragraph relating to his evidence on the inquest, said "that came of trying to serve a father at any hazard!" and Tom, indignant at the accusation of himself, fired a very platoon of cracks from his expressive knuckles.

He had got something else to worry him that morning, in the shape of a reminder from the bill-discounter, and he was consequently as savage as a baited bear.

"Why not offer a reward for information of the author of the libel?" asked Mrs. Marsden, at length, somewhat timidly.

"Hold your tongue, woman! Who asked you to put your spoke in?" Simeon roared across the kitchen, in tones which made her start, well as she was schooled.

"Ah, why not, if you are as innocent as you say?" echoed Tom, testily, as if his patience were exhausted.

Simeon caught at the suggestion from Tom, although he had spurned it from his wife.

He stopped the angry beat of his feet upon the floor.

"How much should I offer, dost thah think? Five pounds?" he asked curiously.

"Five pounds!" sneered Tom, with infinite contempt. "Do you value your good name at no more than five pounds?" and a disagreeable cackle of a laugh sounded just like an echo of his more disagreeable finger-joints.

Ann, kneading a batch of bread in an earthenware pan on the hearth, muttered between her teeth—

"Foive peawnd, indeed! Aw'd be loath to give foive peawnd fur some folks' good neame, or foive shillin' oather!"

"How much dost thah think I should offer—eh, Tom?" asked the big man, ruefully.

"Well, a hundred—or fifty at the least!"

The red face turned blue.

"Fifty!" he gasped. "Eh, Tom!"—utterly ignoring the "hundred," "wouldn't twenty be—— Why, what the d——l brings that d——d wife of Haigh's inside our garden gate?" he cried, as a neat, dapper little woman passed the kitchen window on her way to the back door.

"Hoo's a friend o' moine, an' hoo comes to see me," answered Ann, promptly.

"Friend be hanged! I'll have none of that brood here. Tell the baggage to go about her business, or I'll turn her out!" he bawled.

Ann rose from her knees, set her floury arms akimbo, and, looking her fiery master boldly in the face, replied—

"Look yo, mester! Aw'm not a-goin' to ax yor leave who aw mun choose fur moi friends; an' if yo turn Matty Haigh eawt, aw go too, an' yo may sarvent yorsel'. Yo'n get nobbody else to put oop wi' yor megrims."*

And Ann went out at the back door to her "friend," leaving him to digest her plain-speaking, and to cool down as best he could.

The conference at the back door was not a very long one, but quite long enough to transfer a bulky foreign letter from the visitor's pocket to Ann's.

Then the stout woman went back to her half-kneaded dough as composedly as if nothing had occurred or been said, and Mrs. Marsden went on with her stocking-knitting, not daring to look up, or meet the eye of her faithful servitor.

Simeon, put down by the woman's boldness and truthfulness, said no more, but having resolved to offer twenty pounds reward,

* Megrims—whims, fancies.

left the house for the mill the second time that morning, and his worthy son soon followed at his heels.

Not until the gate clashed after him, and she saw him cross the bridge, did Mrs. Marsden dare to retire to her own room with the welcome letter of which Mrs. Haigh had been the bearer.

Fortunately for tear-dimmed eyes and spectacles, Fred wrote a clear, if schoolboyish, hand; and, without much difficulty, she read his letter through and through again, before she was disturbed:—

"Melbourne, Jan. 27, 185—.

"My Dear Mother and Sister,

"By the time this reaches you I shall be on my way home. I cannot endure the prolonged silence of Caroline and yourselves. Everything here has been in a sadly disorganised state, and nothing more so than the post-office. Our letters may have gone astray, but for all that I feel anxious, and something in my heart tells me I am wanted at home. I have not made the fortune I expected. I have got a little, but not much—at least, not much compared with the fortunes some men make here, and throw away again like dross.

"I have not written to you by every mail. I could not. I daresay your English newspapers would tell you of the insurrection which broke out at Ballarat before we had been here long. It took us quite by surprise, and poor Ned Pipe, going to the door of our tent to learn what all the firing was about, was struck down by a random shot! He was wounded mortally; but before he died he begged me to go round to Calcutta, on my way home, to obtain a quantity of property he had left there, which he implored me to convey, with his dying love, to his old mother in Lancashire; and, with all my anxiety to get home, I cannot break faith with the dead.

"We dug a grave and buried him, hardly safe from the guns of soldiers or insurgents whilst we were doing so. Neither Scott nor myself took any part in the affray; but when it was over, and it was safe for us to venture out and resume our work, we found that our hole had filled with water, and before we could dig deeper, that had to be cleared away. Working in the water threw me on a sick-bed with ague, and nearly all I had saved went to pay the doctor before I recovered; he came twice a week twenty miles, and I had to pay him five pounds every visit, and after all it was not his physic brought me round. There was a climbing plant, with little blue

flowers, trailing on the ground and over our hut; I had seen it taken for medicine. I think they call it here sarsaparilla. I crawled to the door and ate of this, just as a sick dog eats grass; and it cured me, strange as it may seem. Then I went back to our claim, but it was no good; and I felt quite broken down. Scott had caved in, and was off to Melbourne again; when whom should I tumble over but Headlong Bill, when I was thoroughly down on my luck. He offered to take me into partnership, and I suppose we were extra lucky, we found so many nuggets in so short a time. I daresay if I had cared only for the gold I could have made a jolly good thing out of it, but I felt home-sick, and, I may as well own, love-sick. So I sold my share, bade Bill good-bye, and came here along with the Government escort. Give the enclosed letter to my darling Caroline, and tell her I hope she is true to me, though I have not had one line from her since I landed in Australia. I sail next week in the *Thetis* for Calcutta, which has been lying here waiting for a crew, and shall leave India again, I trust, in the first homeward-bound steamer."

The remainder of the letter consisted of messages to home friends, scarcely worth recapitulating here.

Not until the following Sunday, when Ann arrayed herself, as if for afternoon service, was there a chance of conveying Fred's missive to Caroline. Even there the woman hung about, fearing to compromise her own mistress if she professed an errand which should reach the long ears of Mr. Tom.

It so happened that Caroline, from the drawing-room window, saw the trusty messenger at the gate, and flew, rather than ran, to meet her.

Ann yielded up her trust, but not one moment longer would she loiter; and she and her shockheaded companion, Jim, were half way home before Caroline had read and kissed her lover's letter half enough.

"Home!—coming home! My Fred, my love, coming home at last! I'm too happy!" was the glad outpouring of her heart as she paced her room, the letter pressed to her breast.

And, oh, how she longed to have some true friend near, one to whom the joyous tidings would be welcome too!

CHAPTER XLI.

WRECKED.

Mrs. Booth and her husband were at church that Sabbath afternoon, "a stupefying headache" having kept Caroline at home. It was Becka's "Sunday out," and Jane, bedecked in a smart cap, was doing her best to fascinate the widower Scholes, who was leaning listlessly over the little side croft-gate, talking of the hopelessness and bitterness of life.

Ann, therefore, came and went unperceived; but there was no disguising the change which had irradiated Caroline's eloquent face whilst they had been away.

They had left her leaden-eyed, heavy, and drooping. Now, in spite of all her efforts at self-control, her eyes sparkled and every feature beamed with happiness.

Even unobservant Mr. Booth remarked—

"Well, Caroline, lass, has the headache gone—you look so bright?"

And so much of open-eyed amazement was expressed in Mrs. Booth's grey optics that the girl's colour rose under the scrutiny, and she answered, evasively—

"I went in the front garden a while after you left, and the breeze from the water may have done me good. I certainly feel quite refreshed."

"Has anyone been here this afternoon while we were out?" inquired Mrs. Booth, as she walked into the kitchen, ostensibly to give an order respecting tea.

"Nawe, mam!"

"Are you sure?"

Jane opened her eyes. "Sartain!"

"Has Miss Booth been out at all?"

"That hoo hasn't!"

"Where have you been all the afternoon?"

"Whoy, ever sin' aw wur donned* oop, aw've bin i' this kitchen wi' nowt but a cricket for comp'ny. An' it *wur* dull!" —the episode of flirtation at the garden gate she considered to be nobody's business but her own.

"You are sure no one has been here, even with a message?"

"Quoite shure, an' sartain."

* Donned—dressed.

"Aw wunner whatn hoo axed o' thoose questions fur?" Jane said to herself, as soon as her mistress had gone. "If hoo thinks aw'm a-gooin' to tworn spy on ar Miss Carry, hoo maks a mistake. If hoo gies me foine caps an' ribbons to mak a Poll Pry, or a tell-tale-tit on me, hoo may keep her trumpery, fur Jane! Besoides, nobbody did coom. If they didn, aw ne'er seed 'em."

The next morning Mr. Booth came hurrying in from the works, an open letter in his hand.

"Caroline, my love," he called in unusual spirits, "where are you? Here is a letter from William! Fred Marsden is on his way home!"

His daughter came tripping down stairs as he spoke, an amethyst and golden glory from the painted staircase windov resting on her as she came, joyful that her father shared the glad knowledge which had been so oppressive a secret to her.

Simultaneously the parlour door opened, and Mrs. Booth looked up at her also. With a covert smile she turned back into the parlour, they following.

She had learned more from Caroline's manner than from her husband's speech.

"There were no clasped hands, she uttered no cry of surprise, and made a very poor demonstration of it, Daniel," said Mrs. Booth, in confidence, to her brother that evening, when Mr. Booth had gone to spread his news abroad; "she is a very bad actress—as transparent as glass. I knew there was something in the wind last night, and all our precautions have been worse than useless, if she has some private means of communicating with that young fellow."

"You are right, Harriet," he answered, his head in close proximity to hers; "such secret communication indicates suspicion on the alert. We must be wary. Tom Marsden himself is convinced that his mother would not bear his brother's absence so calmly if no news came to her—and yet he hears of none, now the parson has left."

"Wary, indeed! We must be prompt. Do you think you will ever be a partner in the firm, if not one before that Fred comes home—or that you will ever marry her at all, if you are not sharp?"

"But I must, Harriet—I *must*. I love her to desperation;" and the veins rose like whipcord on the forehead of the seemingly-impassive man, as he made that declaration in a fierce undertone.

For some time Mr. Booth had been gradually leaving the

business more and more in the hands of his astute manager; but now and again arose complexities such as never existed in Ralph Hyde's time, and Daniel Dent's excuse was ever—"It is so difficult to deal with such matters, being only a servant;" or, "I could not take upon myself to act decidedly, not being a principal;" until he almost persuaded the bleacher that the very stability of the firm depended on his absolute partnership.

The new wife was an able seconder. She so faddled after Mr. Booth, waited upon him, coddled him up, anticipated his wants, that he vowed she was "the very best wife ever a man had;" and was not too well pleased that Caroline could not see her through his spectacles. When she began to think aloud that he would not need to be so anxious, or to fag himself so much, if Daniel were a partner, the business was as good as done. The weather was hot, and the bleacher, growing rotund, was easily tired; repose was so pleasant to think upon, the perfume of the syringas more odorous than chloride of lime, his grotto and flower-beds more inviting than dash-wheels and bucking-kiers, and cases of moths and beetles more interesting than ledger and bill-book. Caleb Booth was a business man by mistake, and he felt it.

At the end of the week which had opened so auspiciously for Caroline, her father announced, over the breakfast-table, that he was about to take his brother-in-law into partnership.

Mrs. Booth, in a delicate morning-gown, looked on serene and complacent, as Caroline put down her cup in amazement, and asked, in a sort of breathless bewilderment,

"Whatever is that for?"

"Your good father needs rest, my dear Caroline, at his time of life," Mrs. Booth blandly answered for him; "and Daniel will be able to spare him so much more labour and anxiety, as a partner than as a manager, that we think it quite for the best."

It was with more warmth than discretion that Caroline replied—

"And I don't think it for the best, Mrs. Booth. You talk as if my father was an old man. He is not fifty-three yet; and instead of needing rest, he has far too much of it. Activity is imperative to prevent him growing corpulent and apoplectic. I overheard Dr. Ashcroft tell you so, two months ago!"

"Caroline—Caroline!" remonstrated Mr. Booth.

His amiable partner simply folded her hands, raised her eyelids and sighed, as if to say, "Who would be a stepmother?"

The daughter, with a presentiment that danger of some kind threatened the father from the claws now sheathed in those velvety paws, asked abruptly—

"Have you consulted William's trustees?"

"Well—no. Not yet—that is," responded Mr. Booth, somewhat nervously, "it is scarcely necessary; though of course I shall do so as a matter of form."

But Mr. Booth found that it was something more than a matter of form. Neither Mr. Bradley nor the Rev. John Hay would permit the slightest infringement of William's rights; so that any and all concession made to Daniel Dent, if he were admitted, must come wholly and solely out of Mr. Booth's own share of the concern.

And somehow these said trustees so advised and cautioned Caleb that he went home more than half inclined to raise Dent's salary as manager, and abandon the idea of partnership.

Yet the distrust they engendered so depressed and worried his unsuspecting soul, that his wife made his excitement the most potent of arguments why he should have some one to take harassing business off his shoulders; and, unable to resist, he succumbed.

Even then, the trustees, in their ward's interest, cavilled at the deed of partnership drawn up by Mr. Bebbington, and insisted on the modification of clause after clause.

"It is not altogether what I could wish, Harriet," said Daniel to his sister, when the altered deed was signed and sealed, and the partnership gazetted. "But I have got a foothold in the firm at least, and for a man of genius that should be sufficient."

In all this time Caleb Booth's clerk had not ceased to render silent homage to Caleb's daughter. More than once that homage had found expression since family ties united them; but now that "Co." was added to the firm, and he was gazetted as that "Co.," his aspirations became unmistakable.

It was in vain that Caroline spoke openly of her engagement to Frederick Marsden; Mr. Dent's thin, close lips curled, and his shoulders slightly rose, with the most profound contempt for the runaway—the black dog, to whom he and Tom together thought to give so bad a name that Miss Booth must needs decline to share it, even if he did come back to claim her.

If Dent had known how Sophia had armed her against these base insinuations he might have changed his tactics; but hints and innuendoes of Fred's profligacy, based on Nelly Scholes and her earring, instead of rousing jealousy, created a loathing of the scheming brother and sister not to be exceeded

"Oh, for dear Frederick's return to confront and confound them!" was the constant cry of her anxious soul.

But weeks and months went by, and still he came not.

More frequent were her visits to his mother, more anxious and excited the notes she posted in Tyldesley to Mrs. Hay, and less capable of consoling each other became Mrs. Marsden and Caroline. Nor could William or the Hays find reasons to satisfy themselves, still less to content the despairing mother and maiden.

Mr. Hay read shipping-lists, lists of passengers arriving from India, and instituted inquiries, but all to no purpose. At length when no letters came, and no Fred Marsden, the kind curate, spurred by his love for his dear wife, and his sorrow for her sorrow, journeyed to London, and, by the help of a friend, made inquiries at Lloyd's respecting the brig *Thetis*, owned by Collinson and Hughes, of Bristol.

All he could learn was that the *Thetis* had sailed from Melbourne (Port Philip) on the 30th of January, had called at Sydney, Port Macquarie, and Brisbane, on the Eastern Australian coast, to land passengers and consignments, and had never been seen or heard of afterwards. Was supposed to have gone down in a hurricane with all hands. Insurance had been paid as "lost."

If it was painful intelligence to convey to his wife and ward waiting for news in the dark brick house in Ancoats Crescent, how sad was the duty to make it known to Caroline and the bereaved mother!

At Sophia's entreaty he went in person to break the dread news—though he could well have liked to spare himself the pain; and William, feeling for his sister's loneliness, begged permission to accompany him.

To her, buoyed up with hope as she had been, the blow was crushing.

Blanched to her very lips, she sat, stony and rigid, without a tear, staring blankly before her, uttering no word, breaking into no cry.

William spoke to her, her father spoke to her, Mr. Hay whispered a word of pious sympathy; even her stepmother seemed touched by her frozen grief, took her cold, unresisting hand, and chafed it gently.

The maids, conscious of "something oop," put their inquisitive heads in at the open door, and Becka at once ran across the croft to the counting-house, a self-constituted envoy to Mr. Dent, whose frequent shillings had made an ally of her.

"Summat's oop wi' Miss Caroline" sent him flying across the croft; and his sallow face looked livid as he hurried into the midst of the circle around her.

"For God's sake, Harriet, what's——"

Either his hurried entrance, or his impetuous speech, so unwonted, or the sight of the man's emotion, or all together, broke up the ice.

Caroline shuddered, shrank, and fainted without even a scream. They thought she was dead.

Swift as lightning, Daniel Dent darted from the house to the stable, and, mounting bare-backed, rode like a demon for the doctor.

He met the surgeon in King-street.

"I hope your sister has been playing no tricks with the young lady," said he, sternly, as they turned back together, Mr. Ashcroft's steps hardly keeping time with Dent's impatience.

"What do you mean, sir?" he retorted quickly, as if he felt the thrust. "I would die to save Miss Booth!"

"Um! that sounded like earnest; but brothers and sisters are not always of the same mind," quoth the doctor, vouchsafing no further explanation.

John Hay had brought his medical knowledge to bear before Mr. Ashcroft arrived, but Caroline only recovered from her syncope to swoon again; and so she continued until nearly midnight.

The curate's mission lay yet beyond The Willows. His heart sank as he trod the gravel to the Marsden mansion.

Very differently the pious old lady bore her bereavement. Natural tears fell fast, but her words were—

"God's will be done! He was a good son, and we shall meet again ere long beyond the crystal sea. Better, far better lose him thus than lose him as I have lost my first-born."

Apprised of Caroline's pitiable condition, she requested her good son-in-law to step over to the mill, acquaint Mr. Marsden with the supposed shipwreck of their son, and ask permission to use the gig.

For once in his life he appeared to feel a touch of regret. His son's untimely end shocked him. It might be remorse was stirring in his soul. It might be that he felt "judgments" came to others besides Caleb Booth.

He gave grumbling permission for the use of the gig.

Tom came in.

"Drowned! Not he! Men born to be hanged never are drowned. That scamp's not drowned!"

And that was all the moan Tom made.

It was late when Mrs. Marsden and the Rev. John Hay reached The Willows.

Caroline was then insensible. When next she revived Mrs. Marsden supported her. The kind good old lady spoke to her in a low voice.

It acted like a charm.

"Oh, mother!" burst from the white lips of the agonised girl, and the pent-up tears broke forth in a torrent.

"Thank heaven!" said Mr. Ashcroft. "Those tears have saved her reason. You have need to be thankful, Mr. Booth."

"*I* am thankful, doctor," murmured William. "Caroline is *very* dear to *me!*"

"And to me," murmured Daniel Dent, half audibly; and Caleb Booth heard him without a word of censure.

Mrs. Marsden bore Caroline back with her to Tyldesley for change of scene and communion of thought: but, not much to the satisfaction of either lady, Mr. Dent walked over every evening to make inquiries respecting her health, and was well—nay, ostentatiously—received both by father and son.

At the end of another fortnight he drove over in the phaeton to bear her back to The Willows; and, much to her chagrin, unaccompanied by William, although she had expressed a desire for his presence.

She was too much absorbed by her new sorrow to see the drift of so much attention publicly paid and accepted, so long as he had the decency to refrain from open expression of the passion which consumed him.

Yet she could not help, as weeks went by, seeing it in his eyes, feeling it in the touch of his hand, hearing it in the tone of his voice; until after a while he set aside all reservation, and openly sued for her hand.

"It is impossible, sir. My heart lies under the sea with my lost love. I shall never marry."

"Never is a long day, Miss Booth."

"Not longer than my grief, Mr. Dent."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE CASTAWAY.

And where was he for whom expectation had stood on tiptoe and for whom grief was inconsolable?

The *Thetis*, steering northwards from Brisbane, and again westwards as she held on her course between Northern Australia and the Oriental Archipelago, had indeed met with a hurricane in those perilous waters, bristling with coral, and studded with green islands, where cannibalism was rampant.

In his impatience to get back to England, Frederick had once more offered to work his passage—not now for want of means, but to supply one lacking sailor to a crew thinned by desertion to the gold-fields. It was not a passenger vessel, but there were one or two on board; and they, also, though unskilled, had volunteered assistance in case of need, rather than risk delay.

It was a fatal choice for them.

They had been at sea some time before the passengers discovered that Captain Smith and his mate had both a propensity for rum, and less seamanship than should have qualified men to carry the lives of others on their skill.

The boatswain was, however, an old weather-beaten seaman, accustomed to those seas, to whom every reef and islet was as familiar as Temple Bar to a London cabman. More than once this man's hand on the helm had piloted the brig through channels where strict obedience to besotted commands would have sent her aground, and this during fair weather sailing.

They were nearing the Sunda group, when the weather changed. The breeze mounted to a gale—the gale to a hurricane—drove the brig out of her course, and in a rock-strown channel, tropic night came down upon them suddenly as a pall.

The trustworthy old mariner took his place at the helm, and while Captain Smith and his mate were drinking below, issued his commands with the coolness and promptitude which betokened and bespoke confidence; and the crew obeyed him to a man, knowing that their lives were in his hands. Every inch of canvas had been taken in, and the brig was scudding with bare poles.

"Do you think she will weather the gale, bo's'en?" asked

Fred, anxiously, his thoughts flying homeward faster than the winds. "She is straining terribly."

"We are in the Lord's keeping, youngster; and so long as cap'n an' mate keep below, there's not more to fear than I've weathered many a time afore. But it needs a chap who knows where he is, an' a stout heart an' a clear head, to tack among these islands in fair weather, let alone a storm. We'd no right to have bin wheer we are, had cap'n listened to reason. Pray God they keep below."

As if invoked by some adverse demon, captain and mate emerged from the hatchway, only sober enough to be mischievous. With many an oath the former issued commands so adverse to those of the boatswain that sailors, quick and competent to judge between capacity and incapacity, hesitated to obey.

He shouted to the old seaman to reverse the helm, but the man kept on his course. Again the captain roared his orders out, and then the man expostulated firmly but respectfully—plainly telling him that unless they kept within certain points, the brig would be on the rocks in less than a quarter of an hour.

With drunken blindness Captain Smith accused the other of mutiny, and, seizing the helm, which he was unable to control alone, called the mate to his assistance. In obedience to their united efforts the vessel yielded, dashed the water from her bows, and rode buoyantly over the crested waves.

"It's all up with the *Thetis* now, in five minutes," said the boatswain, ruefully, to Fred, "and no boat that ever was built could live in such a sea. Say your prayers, my lad—say your prayers!"

"Breakers ahead—breakers ahead!" bawled the look-out, three minutes later; and almost before the warning words were heard, the *Thetis* had bounded, as it were, into the very jaws of death. She had driven between two stupendous rocks, and, shuddering, stuck in the narrow chasm like a walnut in a pair of nut-crackers.

"To the boats—to the boats!" was the cry, as the waves made a clean breach over the vessel, and hammered at the crushing ribs like the angry tritons that they were.

One boat was gone—gone, too, was the clear-headed pilot who had been so madly superseded.

Sobered by the shock and the dash of the spray, the captain rose to the emergency.

The second boat was lowered—the desperate crew and frantic passengers were crowding into her.

"Quick! to my cabin for my chronometer and log-book," cried the captain to Fred, who hurried below without hesitation.

The lights were still burning, he laid his hands on that he sought, and was back on the deck in less than three minutes.

He stood there alone. They had either left him to his fate, or the cable had parted and the boat gone adrift.

"Boat ahoy!" cried Fred, with the whole strength of his lungs; but there was no response, save that of wind and waves, cracking spars, and rending timbers.

Again he went below, only to see the water spouting in through gaps and gaping seams. He laid his hand on a spirit-flask not completely drained, and possibly that helped to keep life and hope in him.

But the loosened timber, unable to bear the strain, gave way with a sudden crash, leaving him barely time to reach the deck before the incoming torrent swept through the cabin and carried all before it.

Little hope had he then to see betrothed or mother on earth.

"Oh, Caroline, Caroline—would God I could see thee once more!" he cried, in intensest anguish; but the wind, whistling through that rocky chasm, drowned his cry as if with a funeral dirge, and seemed to mock the prayer.

Morn—bright, sparkling, breezeless morn—found the solitary man alive and safe upon a sheer deck, from beneath which the hull had been beaten piecemeal, and which lodged like a shelf between the two rocks that held it fast.

How long it might remain intact, now that the storm had subsided, there was no knowing; but even if the planks held together, starvation stared him in the face.

From that strangely-preserved resting-place he climbed upon the rock, and from its summit descried, about a mile away, a long line of surf which told of land.

From dabbling and bathing in Hindsford Brook when a boy, he had gradually learned to swim, and now was the time to put his skill to the test.

Duck trousers and guernsey were his whole equipment. All the gold and skins he had with him had gone to feed the insatiable sea.

He cast himself into the waves and struck out—not, as of yore, for sport, but for his life. He was no longer the stripling, but a sinewy man, hardened by exposure and toil; and, in spite of that night's exhaustive agony, he breasted the waves gallantly.

It was not until he reached the long line of surf that he felt he was contending with a resolute foe. Thrice he gained the shingle—thrice he was beaten back and washed away; but the tide was going out, and he was left on the beach at last, utterly spent.

Rudely enough was he awakened from his swoon of exhaustion. The sharp prick of a lance recalled him to sensation. A group of naked, dark-skinned, tattooed savages, the stench of whose fish-oiled bodies was horrible, stood around him, jabbering and gesticulating furiously. Others were dashing into the surf, hauling to land casks and driftwood from the wreck. They motioned for him to rise, enforcing compliance with another prod of the flint-headed spear; then, grasping at his arms, dragged him away from the shingly beach to a green and grassy space beyond.

Then they stripped him naked as themselves, and, finding a ship and anchor tattooed upon his arms, began to jabber afresh. He had picked up at the diggings some knowledge of the native Australian tongue, and they employed a kindred form of speech. Imagine the sensations with which he heard them discuss the question of his death and torture, and the toothsomeness of his young flesh!

Luckily for him, part of the tribe was absent, and he was reserved as a *bonne bouche* for the whole force. But they bound him to a blighted tree, suggestively charred as if by fire, and, to pass the time, amused themselves by puncturing his flesh with lances, just deep enough to draw the blood, but not to kill.

They shouted at him, taunted him, danced around him, pinched and pricked his flesh, and one old hag of a *gin** spat in his face; and he, enraged, spat at her back again, whereat the rest set up a shout as if of approbation. The woman grinned, and would have despatched him with a rude axe, but that the weapon was wrested from her; and he was then left to contemplate his lot in quiet, after fully two hours' torture, endured with the pluck of an Englishman who knew that in courage was his only security.

A council was held, when the whole tribe assembled, and the question whether he should be cooked and eaten, or spared and adopted into the tribe, was freely discussed before him. Finally it was put to the vote, and these Australasian cannibal women being (in advance of civilisation) admitted to the franchise, the casting vote of a female, whose husband had been killed in the late fight, spared Queen Victoria a subject.

But that casting-vote came coupled with the announcement

* Corresponds with American-Indian squaw.

that the said *gin* proposed to replace her former partner by taking Fred as her spouse; on whom she straightway lavished endearments he could well have dispensed with. Indeed, he would almost have preferred death, so loathsome and hideous was the old *gin*, whose ugliness was heightened by paint, and the rank fish-oil with which her shrunken body was anointed.

She bore him in triumph to her late warrior's tent—a hut formed of bark, cut in one piece from the bole of a large tropical tree, and whilst green, coiled and fixed much in the shape of an extinguisher, or a grocer's sugar-paper, and there she made him do her suit and service.

He soon, however, found means to rid himself of that incubus. She expected him to maintain himself and her in food with the produce of a bow and arrow, and semi-starvation was the result.

But in the tent of a chief he had seen an old fire-lock, and this, thanks to his lessons in Haigh's workshop, he contrived to repair. Gunpowder (washed ashore from one wreck or other) was not wanting, and flints lay in abundance on the shingly beach.

With the use of this weapon he was tolerably familiar, and soon with the animals he killed he bought himself a younger *gin*, and, turning the tables, made *her* supply *his* wants—at least so far as collecting fruits or catching fish in the streams, which she did with her hands. There was little cookery; they ate their finny banquets as we eat oysters—raw.

How often and how painfully he contrasted that so-called wife and home with what he had fondly looked forward to, it is not possible to say. It was a continuous and protracted agony, to which time brought no relief, as all prospects of escape seemed to grow more distant day by day.

As may be supposed, the gun had made him famous; and now the tribe would fain tattoo him as a warrior and a chief. There was no escaping the distinction. He with difficulty obtained immunity for his face by surrendering his arms and chest to the shark's tooth of the operator. For a first device he himself traced with chalk upon a piece of drift-wood the portrait of his adored Caroline, and soon the faithful copyist transferred it to his arm for ever.

But not to his alone. One warrior after another took a fancy to the same, and soon the portrait of Caroline Booth decorated half the cannibals in Timorlaut.

Hunting, fishing, fighting, and the manufacture of weapons were all the occupations of this primitive, dark-skinned savage

people, whose island produced spontaneously roots and fruits to sustain the life they were so eager to throw away in battle, had they been vegetarians. But island was at feud with island, tribe with tribe, and war, for the sake of human flesh, was a pastime and a duty.

Soon the white warrior was called to use his "fire-maker" against their enemies, and he was put in the forefront, as a hero and a bulwark, having the consciousness that, if he faltered or hesitated, the tribe he served would be the first to hew him down, and make a feast of the coward; yet from the savage feasts which followed victory he turned with loathing and abhorrence.

He fought as one who had no care for life, but he escaped unhurt, though he would have welcomed death as preferable to such degradation.

His *gin* worshipped and obeyed him slavishly, and there being no likelihood of his flying away without wings, he was free to ramble where he would; and be sure he cast his yearning eyes seawards, his desolation growing as one week followed another in slow succession, and yet no sail made the horizon hopeful.

CHAPTER XLIII.

SPIRITS OF GOOD AND EVIL.

ANCOATS CRESCENT is dreary and shabby enough now; thirty years ago it was something more respectable; and the patch of nondescript green within its semicircle could at least claim the right to be called grass.

So when the Rev. John Hay carried his blooming bride away to the din and dinginess of Ancoats, where he lived, like a faithful pastor, among his flock, instead of furnishing a pretty suburban villa at Longsight or Levenshulme, away from his duties, the smoke-grimed brick house was yet in good condition, and their immediate neighbours were respectable.

After all, it is not the outside of a house on which we depend for comfort; and not altogether on the inside, so much as on the inmates.

The house, like most last-century habitations, was built to be lived in rather than looked at. The rooms were snug, and if the windows were narrow and thick framed, Sophia's animated face shone within like a sunbeam, and brightened up alike the gentle brow of crippled William, and the grave, thoughtful features of the man she loved.

So long as William remained with them, a very happy trio assembled in their muslin-curtained parlour in an evening, where a new piano had a place, and where the curate would often call the attention of his young wife to the wants and necessities of the poorer members of his flock.

William, now an interesting youth of seventeen, less pale and fragile than before the amputation of his limb, had been back at The Willows some six or eight weeks; the clergyman seated among his books in the back room, which they called the library, was busy preparing his Sunday morning sermon, whilst Sophia, pretending to read, looked oftener at him than her book, though it was "The Vicar of Wakefield." She was pondering whether her John bore any resemblance to Dr. Primrose, when a modest, single rap at their front door was followed by a tap on that of the library, and a dapper little maid—very unlike free-spoken Ann—put half her body into the room with the question—

"Please, can master go to No. 9, Kennedy-street? There's a poor widow woman a-dyin', an' wants to see him very bad."

"Say I'm coming, Mary," and the Rev. John put down his pen without stopping to finish his sentence, threw off the loose alpaca house-coat he wore, thrust his long arms into the clerical cloth his wife held for him, gave her a hasty kiss in payment, snatched his hat from the stand in the hall, and was off. He was a poor man's parson was John Hay.

One hour, two hours elapsed; the clergyman had not returned.

Sophia began to glance anxiously at the ormolu timepiece on the mantel-shelf. Kennedy-street was close at hand. Whatever could detain him? She began to be alarmed.

Presently she heard his foot on the step, before he raised the knocker, and almost flew to let him in.

The light of the hall-lamp fell not only on the masculine but on a feminine form.

By the hand he led forward a shrinking figure, with a shawl thrown over her head—to all appearance an ordinary factory girl.

But not a word said he until all three were in the library, and the door was closed against Mary, whom his knock had drawn to the hall as well as her mistress.

"My dear," said he then, presenting the young woman to his wife, "I have been happily led to find that which was lost. I need scarcely ask *your* kindly consideration for Nelly Scholes."

"Nelly Scholes!" echoed Mrs. Hay, with a start of something more than surprise, while the young woman put her hands before her face and burst into a torrent of tears.

"Deal gently with her, Sophy, love; the poor thing has suffered terribly," whispered he in his wife's ear; and she, removing the girl's shawl, said—

"I am sorry to hear it; I was afraid it would be so. Look up, Nelly, and dry your eyes; you are with friends."

Her good husband's introduction had been a sufficient guarantee for the waif.

Nelly Scholes! Why, she had met *that* girl in Ancoats-street a dozen times! Nelly Scholes! It was incredible!

Ah, Mrs. Hay, a life of suffering has been concentrated into the two years which have passed since you saw pretty Nelly Scholes!

You would not know your favourite brother could you see *him now*. Rough usage stamps out beauty.

There was no drying Nelly's tears with kind words; they only flowed the faster. It is cold, not warmth, which freezes the fountain.

Leaving her to recover unnoticed, John said to his wife—

"The poor woman I went to see is dead. We can do no more for her. She had sent for me less on her own account than to bespeak my pastoral care for a young girl who lodged in the same house; who had been, through all her sickness, like a daughter to her; and who, besides herself, had not a friend in the world. She gave me an outline of the girl's sad history—sadder, Sophia, than ever you conjectured, yet every circumstance so tallied with your suppositions that I knew this Nelly Scholes and the girl your brother betrayed by a false marriage must be one and the same."

"A false marriage! How? Yet I need not doubt. There is no iniquity too deep for Tom," interjected Sophia, indignantly. Sobbing Nellie spake never a word.

"She left him when his treachery was revealed to her, and came to Manchester in search of work. Trade was slack at the time, known hands were out of work, and the poor woman who has just died found her half-famishing on a door-step. The lass had resisted temptation bravely, the dying woman said, and, when she got work at Murray's factory, proved her gratitude in a hundred ways. The poor widow had 'cast her bread on the waters to be returned to her after many days.'"

"Hoo was th' best friend aw ever had in a' my life, sir; aw could not do too mich fur her!" sobbed Nelly.

"You forget your father!" remonstrated Mr. Hay.

"Nawe, sir, aw dunnot;" and she looked terrified. "But aw'm afeared o' *him*. He strapped me if I nobbut laughed with another lass, and he would kill me now."

She must have read the clergyman's thoughts, she cried so earnestly, "Oh, sir, yo wunnot let him know wheere aw am! He would kill me—indeed he would!"

She had so much the look of a hunted animal as she said this, and was so thoroughly in terror of her father's wrath, that the worthy couple, impressed with a fear lest she should again disappear, or do something desperate, assured her they would do nothing without her consent, and, under the plea that the house of death was no fit place for her, kept her in safety under their own roof that night.

Very serious was the consultation of husband and wife before retiring to rest. They had drawn from Nelly the whole of her painful story, as the reader knows it. The mention of Poll Sharrock supplied a clue Sophia had long wanted to a letter James Brown had sent her brother years before, and which he had dropped in the garden—the letter which had made him fear

her without knowing wherefore. And the production of the false certificate, which Nelly carried about with her, placed Tom Marsden's despicable conduct in so infamous a light, they felt their honour involved in leaving him unpunished.

And yet, both the sister and the Church of England clergyman, for many reasons, shrank from taking the initiative, and the discussion of the question tried Christian principle sorely.

Two things they did—they gave Nelly's one humble friend decent burial without parochial aid; and dressing Nelly in respectable mourning, they kept her under their own roof, to the astonishment of maid Mary, pending the maturity of plans in her behalf.

Great is the power of kindness. They won her to trust their judgment rather than her own, and to consent that her father should be communicated with and his forgiveness sought. How thankful was she in all the after-years of her life that she yielded when she did!

As Scholes himself could neither write nor read that which others had written, and there was no knowing into whose hands he might put a letter for interpretation, Haigh was again applied to. Mr. Hay wrote to the good-natured mechanic, desiring him to seek out Scholes, and acquaint him that his daughter was found, and implored his forgiveness. He was also instructed to say that only the dread of his anger had kept her away from him so long; that she had suffered greatly, and was less culpable than had been supposed. All further intelligence he was to seek from the Rev. John Hay in person.

Glad enough was Haigh to be the bearer of good tidings to the man whose loss had made him more friends in Tyldesley than all his previous austere and discontented life. When Haigh laid his tools aside for the day, doffed his working apron, and put his arms into his week-day jacket, he kissed his wife and little daughter with more than wonted tenderness, and took his way towards The Willows, where Scholes still lived in a room over the stable.

The man was not so far to seek. As though conjured up by some occult affinity or power, Haigh came across him in a retired lane before Atherton Park was reached; and with him was a big, bold-looking woman, whose face was set and dark with evil passions.

Haigh eyed the woman curiously. He had seen her on more than one occasion lurking about Tyldesley after dusk—once slinking into the Flaming Castle; once, as it were, dogging the steps of Tom Marsden.

"Yo'r just th' mon aw cam' t' seek," quoth Haigh, heartily. "Aw've getten some good news fur thee."

"Hast ta? Then out wi' it. Theer's precious little news, or owt else good, comes to me neawadays," Scholes answered, gruffly.

Haigh glanced towards his companion.

Scholes took the hint.

"Aw say, Poll, thee walk on a bit. Aw'll o'ertake thee soon."

"Aw think, Scholes, as thah'd best say 'Good neet,' if thah hasna a job in hand as will na bide," suggested Haigh.

Scholes eyed him with a curious scowl; then, following the woman who was stalking on, there was a sort of altercation, in which the woman seemed to urge something which Scholes sturdily refused. The wind setting towards him, Haigh caught the words at intervals—

"Yo'd best wait—wunnot do—seen together—wheer's t'other?"

At length she went away, muttering discontentedly.

Scholes rejoined Haigh, who put the question—

"Who *is* that woman?"

"Whatn's that to thee? Aw thowt thah'd summat to tell—not to ax," growled the other.

"So aw han; but aw've seen yon blossom afore, an' aw canna help thinkin' hoo's noan th' soart to do credit to a decent chap loike thee."

"That's moi look eawt. An' neaw, whatn's thah bizness?"

"Aw've browt thee news o' thoi Nelly."

A momentary start of surprise was followed by a scornful laugh.

"Thah met ha' saved thi breath. That wench"—and the backward jerk of his head indicated Poll—"has tellt me o' aw'm iver loike t' yer o' Nell i' this warld. Moore nor a feyther con yer 'bout his blood boilin'. But aw meean to be oopsides wi' th' chap as wranged moi lass afore long, if aw dee fur it!"

And the clenched fist of Scholes came down on his grimy palm with vengeful exultation.

"Did hoo tell yo wheer to find yo'r lass?" put Haigh, quietly.

"Nawe!" and now Scholes caught his breath expectantly.

"Then aw con;" and Haigh, without further preface, put the father in possession of so much as the Rev. John Hay had himself thought proper to communicate.

They had walked on, leaving Tyldesley and Poll Sharrock further behind at every step, until, on that very gate where the father's outraged feelings had found vent in tears once before, his head went down on his arms a second time, and sobs shook his frame as a conflict went on in his heart between immediate vengeance and a father's yearnings to behold his long-lost child.

Haigh might have had some inkling of the strife in his breast, he urged him so earnestly to set off that very night by the next train; offering him money if his own funds would not suffice—an offer Scholes proudly declined.

But he went, Haigh walking with him to "stretch his legs" as far as the station at Bury Lane End, where he shook hands with him and wished him well as the train steamed off.

It was late at night when Scholes arrived at Ancoats Crescent, having had to inquire his way from Victoria Station (the space was not then cleared to give a direct route through Miller-street); but there was a light burning in the hall, and the household had not gone to rest.

John Hay had a private conference with his visitor in his study to test the temper of the man before he produced the frightened Nelly. He was surprised to learn how much of the girl's story was already known to him.

"Forgie her!" exclaimed Scholes. "Aw'd forgien *her* lung ago but fur that black-hearted scoundrel Tum Marsden. I'll trample him into th' dust, and be th' deeath o' him at last, so help me——"

"Hush!" interposed the clergyman. "You must not expect the help of God in acts of violence. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, *I* will repay!'"

The religion of Scholes had ever been stern and uncompromising, and there is no doubt that, in his thirst for private vengeance, he regarded himself as an appointed instrument to work the vengeance of the Almighty on an atrocious sinner. He was not to be turned from his purpose with a single text; and the Rev. John had to combat more than dogged prejudice and animosity.

The re-union of father and daughter, alike penitent for the past, is too sacred for the novelist's intrusion. Let us turn to that which comes within our scope.

Much in the same spirit as Mrs. Booth, who had counselled secrecy to Caroline, lest Scholes should be provoked to revenge his wrongs on Frederick Marsden, Daniel had not failed, "out of the sympathy he felt for the father," to reveal that the "fellow

earring" had come in a box of flowers from Fred, in Australia; and so the moody man nursed his revenge against the gold-seeker's return. But when Poll Sharrock, on a hint from Bebbington's clerk (who had, or thought he had, wrongs of his own to readjust), came to him with another and truer story, told with all the vehemence of intense hatred of her own betrayer, Scholes weighed the one tale against the other, and saw that Mr. Dent had played into the hands of Tom Marsden only to dupe him.

He would have waylaid Tom Marsden and murdered him then and there; but Poll, more subtle, if not less bitter, led him to help her in her schemes to torture and ruin him, *before* he killed.

So, having lost his faith in Mr. Dent, he took French leave of the bleach-works that 3rd of November; and Mr. Thomas, visiting his friend the following day on business concerning the "company," found the people at The Willows very much perplexed thereby—Jane having a decided tendency to abstraction, which led to sundry mishaps, such as boiling a dishcloth in mistake for a pudding, &c.

It was late in the afternoon when Tom Marsden went, so he was invited up to the house to make one at the tea-table, then to join in a game of whist, with Mr. Ashcroft for his partner; whilst Daniel Dent, intent on weaning Miss Booth from sorrowful remembrance, had the mortification to have his most insinuating speeches cut short by her recurrence to one topic—the many narrow escapes William had had, since his return home, of falling over pencils, cotton reels, and such small matters, which seemed to drop about stairs and floors most unaccountably.

Mr. Booth kept a good bottle of wine, to which neither the doctor nor Tom Marsden was averse, and so it was quite eleven o'clock before they took leave, and closed the garden gate behind them.

As the pair, arm in arm, reached Leigh Market Place, Mr. Ashcroft, looking up, remarked the redness of the distant sky, and expressed his fears of fire.

"Pshaw!" said polite Tom; "it's only some of those idiotic fools over our way, who

"'Remember—remember
The fifth of November;
With red fire and rockets
To burn up their pockets,'"

and he chuckled and cracked his knuckles in self-satisfaction at his own poetical powers.

"Well, I hope it's nothing more," said the doctor, as they shook hands and parted.

Be sure, Tom took the nearest route, and went through the Park; for though the night was dark, there was not much danger of getting into the lake, so long as he felt the gravel under his feet. But the nearer he drew to the Lion's Bridge, the redder grew the distant sky, and he began to hurry forward.

"Upon my soul," he exclaimed, "I believe the doctor was right! I think it is a fire!"

Think! There was no seeing the dark November sky for the ruddy glare, and the still lake grew crimson in the glow. Think! The flames shot up in the air, and showers of fiery sparks flew up, and were extinguished in dense volumes of black smoke.

And as he, the shambling valetudinarian, ran with a strange new fear at his heart—ran as one who runs a race with Fate, alarm bells rang from church and factories, and long before he tore down Castle Hill, all Tyldesley was afoot, and the cry went up—

"Marsden's mill's a-fire! Marsden's mill's a-fire!"

Ay, and before he reached the spot, fire-engines were on their way from Manchester and Bolton, called thither by the telegraphy of the sky.

But fire is fleeter than horses, and from every window of the mill the flames belched forth, and the sparks flew upwards with a roar, as if in mockery of the brook which ran so close, yet watched it so impassively.

Simeon Marsden was running hither and thither in a frenzy of impotent excitement. Tom's presence seemed to restore him.

Local and private engines were already there in the road, and in the mill-yard, spending their inefficient force upon the mass of flames.

From her house across the road, Mrs. Marsden, left alone, even by Ann, anxiously watched the flames ascend from floor to floor, until the roof itself went in, and volumes of smoke and flame shot up, and the fiery shower intensified fell even over the square mansion on the hill.

And still she watched with straining eyes and blanched lips as the walls grew incandescent in the heat. And then she heard and saw the Bolton engine dashing down the hill; and then there was a shout as if to receive it. And then another

shout, which was a shriek, rent the air, and she saw the front wall shake, and bend, and come down with a crash into the yard beneath.

Husband, son, fortune—all lay under that smoking pile of ruins!

CHAPTER XLIV.

WOUND UP.

Their charred bodies were dug out of the ruins as soon as it was safe for firemen and labourers to make the attempt.

And then there was an inquest—an inquest which brought back to memory a former; and a whisper went about recalling Simeon Marsden's own theory of "judgment."

Job Hindley and his wife were with the widow in an hour after the disastrous news reached them—the shop being left to the assistant, and Emma's baby to a nurse; and in their own way they did their best to console her.

John Hay, too, was summoned, and with him came Sophia, whilst Caroline hastened over from Leigh; and poor Mrs. Marsden felt that true hearts lived and beat for her, if the false ones were stilled for ever.

Job was very deferential to John Hay, whom he looked upon as a sort of superior being, not merely on account of his calling, but of his family and education; though to the curate this excessive homage was painful.

They were both present at the inquest at the Flaming Castle, as were also Daniel Dent and Mr. Booth.

No one knew how the fire had originated. But more than one spoke of a strange woman who had been hanging about Tyldesley of late, who had been seen to accost Mr. Tom Marsden, and heard to curse him bitterly when he had shaken her off. Haigh came forward, stated that he had met the said woman in Squire's Lane with Scholes, the very day before the fire; repeated the few words he had overheard, and that Scholes called her "Poll."

Then one of the libellous handbills was produced to show that some one unknown nourished a vindictive feeling against the Marsdens, and Scholes again was openly adverted to.

Mr. Dent, as if to strengthen suspicion, came forward and testified that Scholes had absented himself, without leave or warning, from The Willows, from the very time at which he had been seen with this woman, and a very strong feeling manifested itself against the man.

But the Rev. John Hay here interposed, his testimony being received with not more attention than surprise.

He stated that, on the night of the 3rd November, Scholes came to his house, Ancoats Crescent, Manchester, in obedience to a summons from himself, sent through Haigh, and that he was there with his daughter Nelly on the 4th (the night of the fire), and, to the best of his belief, there he still remained. He added that the man had certainly nourished a vindictive feeling against the deceased mill-owners, having been greatly wronged by the younger, who had entrapped his daughter into a false marriage; but that he was as much thunderstruck by the news of the fire and its fatal results as anyone present—only that he had said it "was like a judgment from heaven."

This statement was confirmed by Haigh, who had never left Scholes from the time he quitted the woman until they shook hands through the moving carriage window.

To this *alibi* Scholes owed his safety—a verdict of "Incendiarism" being recorded against a woman answering to the name of Poll, and some other person or persons unknown.

The destruction of Marsdens' mill, with all its new machinery, on which no fresh insurance had been effected, caused the sudden collapse of the Cotton-Spinning and Weaving Company.

And now Daniel Dent began to show himself in his true colours.

Caleb Booth's own knowledge of plants, and his preliminary experiments with the Cotton-Grass filaments, had kept him free from entanglement with the "Cotton-Grass-Textile-Fabric Company;" but the other company, with Marsdens at its base, had something more tangible in it, and on Dent's representations he had allowed himself not only to become a shareholder, but to be nominated a director—and those were not the days of "limited liability."

Ruin, utter ruin, seemed impending; the claims of shareholders would swallow up all his private capital; and, to make matters worse, the affairs of the bleaching firm appeared to become more complex and entangled every day.

In this exigence his new partner offered his aid.

But he offered to clear Mr. Booth from the claims of the Cotton-Spinning and Weaving Company on the condition that Caroline should become his wife.

He had proposed to her with Caleb's entire approbation, and been repulsed; and easy, good-natured Caleb, seeing no objection to him, had said, encouragingly—

"Give her time; Fred Marsden was not a lad to be forgotten all at once."

He had "given her time," and was waiting as any other wild

animal waits for its prey, when that disastrous fire threw all his schemes into confusion, and precipitated a crisis. He was in want of money for his personal needs, and Caroline's two thousand pounds was just then as much a necessity to him as was herself.

About this time, Daniel Dent and his sister had an altercation in that morning-room where, two years and a half before, he had listened to the reading of Ralph Hyde's will. It was an unusual circumstance for them to disagree; but even in the heat of temper they kept their voices low, from force of habit.

They had been discussing the state of affairs, and his want of money. She grew impatient.

"Now, Daniel, it just comes from your excessive caution; you are always saying—'Wait—wait—wait.' I'd have had that limping lad out of the way, and his money in our hands long ago, but for you—and that sister of his who watches his movements as if he were a baby. It's no use dropping pencils and thimbles for him to step over—her eyes are too watchful!"

"Stop, Harriet; you need to thank my caution. If that money had come to his father before Marsdens' accursed fire, it would have gone in the general wreck. And trust me, I know how to keep your home over your head, if it comes to a pinch. But the only way to win Caroline is to frighten her about her father."

Acting on this principle, he worried Mr. Booth with all these business matters hitherto kept so sedulously from him, and took care that his involvement with the company should look as black as possible.

Of course Caleb's distress of mind was visible in his face, and his pain was shared by his children.

William loudly lamented his inability to apply his own money for his father's benefit without the concurrence of guardians; and Caroline offered her poor two thousand pounds only to be told it would be a mere sop in the pan.

At this juncture Daniel Dent made final proposals to Caroline, plainly telling her that it was her only chance to save her father from utter ruin. He had the power, he said, to avert the evil by a personal sacrifice which he would only make as her husband.

With every subtle syllable he uttered, her loathing grew; but she was clear-headed, and in his very proposition she saw a loophole for escape.

She begged a week for deliberation; and, believing his triumph secure, he assented graciously.

No sooner was he gone than, having said she had a headache, and must lie down, she locked her chamber-door, and slipping downstairs, and out through the glass-door of the drawing-room unobserved, hurried as fast as feet could carry her to Mr. Bradley's.

She found the lawyer in his office; and not greater was his surprise at her visit than at the clearness of her perception and her business tact.

"I cannot understand," said she," how this man, who was but a poor clerk two years and a half ago, should have gained such an ascendency in the firm and over my father. But, indeed, my father appears to have lost all his business faculties. He does not drink, but he seems in a sort of torpor or stupor half his time, until I feel—heaven forgive me!—as if that stepmother of mine was drugging him. I have read of such things, and they must be possible. Then William, who came home so well, is failing again."

"Miss Booth," said the lawyer, much struck, "this is a terrible accusation. Have you spoken to Mr. Ashcroft?"

"No, sir; I wish you to do so. I could not enter his house without exciting suspicion, if my theory be true. Mr. Hay has given me some mysterious hints, which I could not fathom at the time, but which are clear enough to me now."

"Mr. Hay? Ah! Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. You are aware how my father is involved as a director in that horrid company, which was altogether a scheme of Mr. Dent's?"

Mr. Bradley nodded assent.

"This morning, Mr. Dent, not for the first time, sir" (and the blood mantled to her pale cheeks), "made a proposal of marriage to me, coupled with an intimation that, if I consented, he could save my dear father from the ruin which, he says, is otherwise inevitable."

"He did, did he?" and Mr. Bradley's bullet head went on one side.

"Yes, sir. And it struck me that, if he had the legal power to save my father, it could be done just as well without my marriage as with it, and that that legal power must exist irrespective of Mr. Dent at all."

"My dear Miss Booth, your perception does you credit. There is rascality on the very face of the thing! And what was your answer?"

"I begged a week for deliberation, and have hurried here to ask you to search into the affairs of the company in the mean-

time, to ascertain if nothing can be done for my father without——"

"Such a sacrifice," appended the lawyer. "Well, we'll see. You may, however, have to beg a second week's grace. By-the-by, I have had another visitor from The Willows to-day."

Caroline looked questioningly.

"Your brother was here wanting to throw good money after bad. I have promised to send for Mr. Hay, but don't think he will see the show any more than myself."

Caroline got back to her room without being missed.

Mr. Ashcroft began to drop in and talk to Mr. Booth as a friend sympathising with his troubles, and came to his conclusions pretty rapidly.

Mr. Bradley set to work, but found a week all too little for searching the ins and outs of a public company where fire had destroyed testimony.

The week came to an end, and Caroline, between her fears for her father, her brother, and herself, was in a state bordering on distraction.

Daniel Dent professed inability to grant delay, and required Caroline's final decision that evening.

William was in as great distress as herself.

"Don't have him, Caroline," had been his advice. "Let the house and father's money go. What Uncle Ralph left will be enough for all of us."

"Aw say, Miss Booth," said Jane, affrightedly that afternoon, "theere's two big rough-lookin' fellys acomin' oop th' garden; aw'm afeart they're bumbailies, an booath measter an' missus are eawt. Bless moi loife, they're comin' reawnd to th' back dur."

Caroline started to her feet in terror. Sure enough two rough-looking men were passing the bay-window, and before Jane or she could reach the door the foremost of the men was in the hall.

As she advanced in alarm, he extended his arms, uttered the one word "Caroline," and she sprang to his clasp without a word.

She had fainted.

"Whoy, Measter Marsden, it conno' be yo! Aw tuk yo fur a bumbailie!" blurted out Jane.

"Oh, Frederick, I'm so thankful! We heard you were drowned. You have come most providentially!" exclaimed William, coming forward on his crutches.

But Fred, the great rough-bearded fellow, was too much

concerned in restoring Caroline from her swoon to do more than listen.

Jane ran for hartshorn; but Fred's passionate kisses had brought her round before the hartshorn came.

And now she clung to him and questioned him, and wept upon his breast, heedless how rough and coarse his garments were, or how much he was changed; and in her ecstasy forgot the momentous question to be answered ere the night was out.

His companion meanwhile had walked into the kitchen, and, planting a chair in front of the blazing fire, put his muddy boots on Jane's bright fender, took out a short pipe, and made himsel easily comfortable.

Presently came in Mr. Bradley and the Rev. John Hay, both looking profoundly wise. Hearing of Jane's odd misapprehension, Mr. Bradley said it might not be amiss if they supported the characters of bailiffs for a few hours, even at the risk of disturbing Mr. Booth for a brief space.

Mrs. Booth, with Becka at her heels, came back from her shopping to find one great fellow at his ease in the parlour, and another, who eyed her curiously, in the kitchen. She bit her nails, and thought Daniel had no business to let matters go so far.

Soon came in Caleb Booth, and after the first painful start and shock, sat down with his head drooped on his hands in his chair by the parlour fire, evidently feeling that his home and his household gods were passing from him.

Tea was brought in, but there were too many strong feelings at work for eating or drinking.

Mr. Dent's step was heard on the oil-cloth—not the noiseless tread of the unpresuming clerk, but the step of a master. His sister went out to speak to him.

"Ah, this is a lucky chance indeed. It will put the screw on with a vengeance!"

He little thought how! Walking into the kitchen, he asked the man for his warrant.

"'Tother chap's got it," was the answer, in a voice which made Mr. Dent prick up his ears.

"It's all right, Daniel; Mr. Bradley is in the parlour, and he has seen it."

"Tell Caroline I wait for her in the drawing-room. We'll soon get rid of these men."

Mrs. Booth delivered her message.

"Caroline," said her father.

She went and knelt at his knee.

He smoothed her hair as he had been wont to do, and whispered in a broken, hopeless voice—

"Never mind me, love. The worst is over now a bailiff sits on my hearth. Don't have him, if you don't like him."

"I don't intend!"

There was something in the firmness of that decision which struck her father; but after saying, with a sort of hopeless sigh, "Well, well, my dear, you must please yourself," his head dropped again, and he seemed lost in contemplation of the fire.

He took no notice that the supposed bailiff left the room in the wake of Caroline, or that Mr. Bradley followed, until he was aroused by distant scuffling.

Then he and William hastened to the drawing-room, to find Caroline encircled by the arm of one of the intruders, the other keeping guard over his partner, Daniel Dent, whose wrists were secured by handcuffs, and whose sallow face had grown cadaverous.

"Wha—what on earth does this mean?" he stammered out.

"It means," answered Fred, extending his hand, "that Caroline has refused to marry anyone but me, Mr. Booth, seeing that I have not gone to the sharks; and that your crawling clerk is an escaped convict; and that my chum, Headlong Bill, from whose service in Geelong he escaped with more than belonged to him, has a Governor's-warrant to take him back to Botany Bay, and his precious sister with him. The pair have more to answer for in Australia than you might like to hear. And I trust, Mr. Booth, we may be able to keep bumbailiffs away from The Willows without their valuable assistance."

But Mr. Booth appeared daundered; and by the time he recovered from his amazement, and comprehended something of that transformation scene, the sister of Caleb Booth's partner was not to be found.

Guilt readily takes alarm; something in the voice and face of the rough "bumbailie," smoking on the kitchen hearth, had roused a slumbering sentinel in her breast, and the first movement of those strange men towards the drawing-room had set her on the alert. As Caroline had once said, she *did* "calculate *all* chances," had means and money ready, and knew where to lay her hand on more. Whether she followed her brother Daniel and his captor to Australia was not ascertained for fifteen months or more. But the steamer had not been a week at sea before Headlong Bill's sharp eye observed that the zealous and ubiquitous stewardess found her way to the steerage, and had some sort of private communication with his prisoner. Whereupon he had a

conference with the captain: she was watched narrowly; the ex-digger contrived to be pitched against her with a lurch of the vessel, and to save himself, as it were, caught at her head-gear. As he expected, cap and coal-black wig came off together, and a dust-brown head, pretty closely cropped, was visible. Compulsory soap and water removed the black eye-brows and rose-tinted cheeks; and after that the stewardess was superseded by a passenger, and Harriet Booth kept from further mischief.

Caleb Booth never saw either his second wife or his sometime clerk again. It was only known that Daniel and his sister, whose one virtue was her love for him, met with their deserts when Headlong Bill handed them over to the Melbourne authorities. They had wrought him ruin, and he was their Nemesis.

James Brown, threatened with prosecution for his share in the fictitious marriage of Nelly Scholes and Tom Marsden, in hopes of staying proceedings against himself, offered information to inculpate Daniel Dent in several fraudulent schemes.

From him and Mr. Bebbington they learned that Marsdens' mill had been burned down *before* its transfer to the company had been legally completed: and so Mr. Booth's liability sank to a minimum.

With a very inconsiderable exception, Simeon Marsden's wealth was gone. At least the clue to his investments was not to be found. It was supposed he lost his life in his frantic efforts to recover money and securities secreted on the premises.

But Frederick had brought enough from Australia not only for himself and Caroline, but to make his dear mother comfortable for life—thanks to the prudence which placed the bulk of his hard-won gold in the Melbourne bank for transfer, instead of carrying it with him on shipboard.

When Caroline took a partner for life, another partner entered the firm with capital, energy, and integrity, to build it up anew, and restore its old character amongst manufacturers.

William grew strong again, although shorn of a limb; and in time became to the bleach-works and to his nephews and nieces much what Uncle Ralph had been to him and Caroline.

There was a friendly strife with which of her children Mrs. Marsden should take up her abode: but Sophia and the Rev. John prevailed, and she went to the old-fashioned house at Ancoats until his presentation to a good living called her son-in-law to another neighbourhood, and a larger but not happier home. And Ann stuck to her old mistress in spite of Jim-o'-the-Brook.

Scholes and Nelly never returned to Tyldesley. A shop was taken for them, doing a good general trade amongst factory operatives; the stock was replenished, and the house furnished for them by Sophia and Fred. They put their past behind them, and looked forward hopefully; and the strong affection between child and parent was the talk of the neighbourhood.

Job and Emma jogged on placidly and prosperously, with a full appreciation of their own Christian graces and perfection.

And Poll Sharrock! What of her? When Hindsford brook was cleared of the débris which dammed its current, a blue swollen corpse was found beneath, and from the shawl around it, Haigh recognised the body as that of the woman Poll.

And be sure Haigh prospered—he had made so many good friends.

But how had Fred Marsden made his escape from his savage captors? Let us tell it as he was wont to tell his children, as they clustered in the bay-window of the old parlour, or in summer grouped round the table in the grotto, in the wall of which his eldest son one day discovered a large conch-shell that had been broken at one end, and so displaced as to serve for a pretty efficient ear-trumpet for any listener in the garden at the back.

"Well, my dears," Fred would begin, "I was only six weeks on the island after all, but they seemed like six years, so much agony was compressed into them. At the end of that time I saw a sail in the offing; and soon a boat was lowered and manned as if to come ashore for water. I knew that not a tar amongst them but would make a meal for cannibals, if once they landed. I made signals, which they either did not see or did not comprehend, for they held their course. The surf was running high at the time—it was useless to strike out from the beach—I should have been driven back. So I ran quite two miles to reach a cliff—ran with my naked feet, cut and bleeding, over stones and brush, and brier, and before I reached the edge, the savages were in swift pursuit, their arrows falling round me. I threw myself from the rock into the sea, and struck out. My flight had been observed from the boat, and as I swam to them they met me, and took me in. It was an English ship bound for Sydney, thank God! I acquainted them with their danger, and then they pulled away with a will to reach the vessel, a score of canoes in chase. Then followed a sharp fight to save me, as the canoes surrounded us, and the savages climbed the ship's sides like monkeys. But guns and swords were too much for them in the end, and at length they beat a retreat,

and so did we. On Sydney Wharf I found my old mate, Headlong Bill. Thence we went together to Melbourne and Ballarat, and there I found letters lying. And talking matters over with Bill, I set him on the track of an old runaway convict servant of his, an infamous scoundrel, who was once your grandfather—Caleb Booth's—clerk, and wanted—the rascal—to marry your own dear mamma."

THE END.

APPENDIX.

I know not how far it is wise or unwise to open the windows of the loom-house wherein are woven the webs of thought which we label novels, or to let my readers see how strong is the warp of fact across which I throw my weft of fable; but having done so heretofore I feel constrained to do so to the end.

In this instance I have neither given a "repetition of Mayne Reid" nor "imitated Marryatt," as one of my critics suggested. The real adventures and love-story of a sea-faring relative formed the base of this novel (Caleb Booth's Clerk); and from him, whom I have called Fred, and given as a son to Simeon Marsden, I have a letter of "thanks for the papers containing the story of my life;" which came to me some years ago from Australia, where he is still living, and his good true wife Caroline lies buried. The shipwreck, however imperfectly described, is true in all its peculiar details; and I may add that I have given but a small portion of a most adventurous career in this book of mine. My hero (I do not mean Daniel Dent) has been twice shipwrecked: once, when in the East India Company's service, was burnt out in the Hoogly river, hauled to shore in a rope cradle, with a frantic woman in his charge, who struggled out of his clasp, and would have been drowned had he not clutched the hair of her head and set his teeth in her clothes. His hair-breadth escapes, of which he bears the marks in his person, would fill volumes; though mine is scarcely the pen to tell them. I may, however, intimate to those curious in such matters, that, like David Copperfield, he was born with a caul. Caroline's mother, in reality, died from the shock occasioned by her brother's terrible death in their own manufactory; the stepmother who intercepted letters succeeded naturally.

I depicted William from a sweet little fellow I knew in Leigh, whose swollen knee killed him.

Simeon Marsden and his son Tom are likewise portraits. The bank notes were not discovered—but burnt. Between twenty and thirty years back there was a sort of mania for secret and wholesale poisoning, greed being in most cases the motive power. Palmer, the notorious Rugeley poisoner, was known to my husband, who said he was a most genial companion and host, one never to be suspected of a crime; and a friend of ours from Rugeley still says of Palmer, "he was a very nice man for all that!"

Until my book was written I had no idea that "The Cotton-Grass Textile Fabric Co." had ever had a projector more real than those I have given. My idea was to show that nothing was too flimsy for the "promoter" to found a bubble company upon.

ISABELLA BANKS.

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> "I might have been." Oh, sad suggestive words,
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> How sadly do they sound on memory's chords,
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> I might have been a wiser, better man,
> With signs of well-won honour on my brow,
> Had I adhered to Nature's simple plan,
> Or reasoned with myself as I do now.
> True, that my life has been with ills beset—
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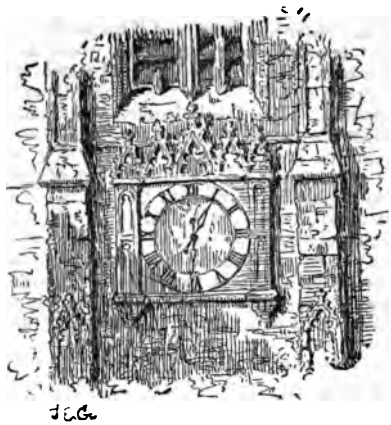

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